

CLUB TROUBLE



SADERIA SERIES BOOK 6

SARAH RENEE

Club Trouble

The sixth book in the Saderia Series

Sarah Renée

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Tiger Print Books

Chapter One

The Game

The forest was silent. The trees stood dark against the night sky, throwing imposing shadows across the damp forest floor. Obscured in shadows, the plants seemed to droop and hide in their leaves as the bright silver moon sank into a cluster of clouds, hiding the only light in the dark woods. Water trickled through the grass past the powerful paws of a lioness with barely a sound, as if trying to sneak around the deadly predator. The only noises that could be heard were the light pitter-patter of rain and the occasional clap of thunder.

A flash of lightning split across the sky, making the trees shudder. Thunder boomed, echoing through the silent forest. The bright yellow flash shone through the leafy canopy above, illuminating a patch of the lioness's face through the darkness. Her cold blue eyes gleamed in the shadows and the fervor in them was unmistakable, like fire on ice. The thunder crackled, then died away, leaving only the sound of rain. The lioness blinked once, sending droplets of rain flying to the ground, then flicked the water off her paw, her tail suddenly lashing across the damp, leafy ground.

"They're gone," she murmured, her voice a whisper through the rain. "Finally, they're gone. I was the sole survivor."

The lioness closed her eyes, picturing the wide stone hollow carved into the ground with cold, rocky ledges leading down to the bottom—the only place she could call home. The only shelter from the rain and the predators was a stony cave carved into the wall over one of the ledges, unnoticeable to anyone above it and well hidden to any who entered the hollow. She imagined the cold, rainy nights spent with her tail wrapped around her paws with only her own body heat to keep her warm as she struggled to ignore the cold touch of the hard stone below her. She recalled silent nights when her eyes had never closed as she had stared at the entrance to the cave, just waiting for death to arrive. That was the place

where she had hidden and lived after the other animals had abandoned her and left her to die at the hands of a brutal enemy.

Her eyes opened and flicked to the dark stream lapping through the grass just beside her as the memories disappeared. With a cool glint in her icy blue eyes, she rose to her paws to pad over to the rushing water and hung her head over the edge of the riverbank to stare down at the currents, the rain spilling over her creamy yellow fur and dripping past her eyes. Her reflection wavered in the stream. Through the silence, she could hear a soft plunking sound as the rain struck the surface of the water, making the river swell and churn.

Without a sound, the lioness turned to follow the stream, the sound of her light paw steps unnoticeable in the rain. The frosty glint in her eyes reflected in the water. “They left me behind to die, every last one of them. I’m sure Princess relished the moment,” she murmured to herself. “But I knew she’d be back. She’d never leave her precious home. Not ‘the place of her *ancestors*.’”

A smirk twitched at the corners of her mouth. “And now she is back. She and the rest of the animals who abandoned me. And those hunters are gone. I bet she had something to do with that. She always does. Princess always has to play the hero. I’m sure she dragged her so-called friends along with her to save the day.”

The lioness turned her gaze to the sky, her ice blue eyes shimmering in the darkness and blazing with a deep fury. “Princess believes she is indestructible, that she can never die. I have to admit, she has a right to after all that she’s survived. But now she’s just getting cocky. She *can* die. And she *will*. ”

The lioness quieted as the stream came to an abrupt end and the sound of rushing water grew so loud and strong it was enough to drown out a loud burst of thunder in the sky. The lioness smiled a slow, devious smile as she stared down at the place she had been searching for. It looked just the way the book had described it.

A crystal blue waterfall tumbled down into an enormous, overgrown valley just beyond the lioness’s strong paws. Thick trees, dense shrubbery, and thorny undergrowth dotted the land below her. Even from a distance, she could see how long, thick, and tangled the grass had grown. A wide, shadowed pond lapped at its edges just below the waterfall, swelled to its

banks with the new influx of rainwater. In the center of the clearing were several smooth rocks—one high and almost proud-looking, and the others lined up before it in an almost obedient fashion. All around the valley were thick, rocky ridges covered with dirt and wild, flowing grass. The ridges were so high they completely encompassed the entire valley.

The valley below her seemed almost unbelievable, like a scene out of a dream. The lioness had never seen anything like it. But then, no one else had either. Not for a few millennia, at least.

It was particularly well hidden. The top ridge ran around the valley and connected to the piece of land near the top of the waterfall where the lioness was standing. Trees completely surrounded the ridge, so thick and foreboding that from afar they had seemed to lead into nothing but a world of darkness. The woods surrounding the valley were unbelievably thick and almost impossible to navigate. As it was, it had taken the lioness weeks to find the place, and she had only found it because of an old book she had recently gotten her paws on.

The book had told her of the hidden valley and its importance in the past. It had described how to find it in a twisted, convoluted way that had frustrated her so much she had come close to just tossing it in the river. It had also detailed how the valley looked so that she could recognize it when she saw it. Despite all the descriptions, though, only one truly allowed the lioness to identify the valley: the description of the ridges and their unique position. Everything else described in the book was no longer true.

The trees lining the enormous valley were no longer scarred by claw marks, nor was the dirt painted red by bloody paw prints. The waterfall and the pond below it were no longer tainted with the sticky red trace of blood. No longer did gruesome plans and proclamations hang from the naked branches of dead trees, and gone were most of the eerie stones bearing cruel epitaphs that marked the gravesites of enemies. The book held endless, chilling details about the valley, but no traces of them were left now. Time had healed the wounds of the past.

The lioness didn't care much for history, but she did have to admit that her son's ancestry was interesting. In an act of pure curiosity and boredom, she had stolen the old book that told her about the valley from an old house where it had always been overlooked. The book held many details about hidden lands where her son's ancestors had conspired in secret

and hidden in times of trouble. She had no idea what some of the things in the book meant. Usually, it didn't describe what the secret places were actually used for or why they were needed, but she didn't care about that. The only thing she was interested in was the valley below her.

Because that was where the game would begin.

The corners of the lioness's mouth curled up in a cold, eerie smile. Now that the Princess of the forest was back, she would probably be relaxing, trying to cool off after her latest adventure. After leaving the forest and the lioness behind to go play Princess in another land, the Princess had probably faced many difficulties. From eavesdropping on some of the returning, unsuspecting forest animals, the lioness had heard there had even been a war. Now that all of that was over, the Princess would probably want to relax and enjoy the reprieve from her struggles. Little did she know, the games were only just beginning. The Princess didn't deserve a day off.

The lioness snickered to herself, thinking of a speech the Princess had made to the forest animals just a few weeks before they had all left. She had listened in on the speech without being noticed and had heard the Princess proclaim that she didn't *want* to leave the forest because of all the history her family had left behind, but that she *had* to. Always playing the hero.

The lioness rolled her eyes. The Princess thought *she* had some interesting ancestry, but it was nothing compared to the history of the lioness's son. Of course, according to a few inscriptions in the book, her son's history and ancestry appeared to be deeply intertwined with the Princess's. It was mildly interesting. The lioness would have never guessed that hatred for the royal family was genetic.

Either way, it didn't matter because the past was the past. And though the past was gone and behind her, certain punishment had to be dealt to the Princess for the decisions she had made. She and her happy-go-lucky family needed to pay for the damage they had done to her and her life.

The lioness grinned, memorizing the valley so that she could find it again. With thoughts of the valley and the game that would soon begin there clear in her mind, she snickered and turned around to race back to her home. In a flash of lightning and speed, she raced off into the forest as thunder roared in the sky.

While thunder boomed and rain sprinkled the forest in the world below, a dark spirit began to pace. His blazing amber eyes flashed in the sleepy darkness of the spirit world. Gritting his teeth, he stalked back and forth across the translucent grass in the hazy, ghost-like forest, his black-tipped tail flicking irritably to and fro and his pitch black mane rustling around his powerful shoulders. A low growl rumbled in his throat just as thunder bellowed in the world below. Letting out a vicious snarl, the spirit whirled around to pace back across the grass as lightning struck the living world. With flashing amber eyes, the lion slowly stalked up to the wispy, glowing white circle carved into the grass as it shone like a shimmering pool of water. Soundlessly, he glared down at the image of the living world swirling in its ethereal depths and gritted his teeth.

“Princess...” The word hissed out of his mouth like a breath of bitter cold. “She won. Again.”

“Her name’s Saderia.”

At the sound of the light, cautious voice, the dark spirit instantly whirled around. His amber eyes narrowed when he saw who had stepped up behind him.

A shimmering light brown dingo with sparkling light brown eyes and an old pink bandana tied around her neck stiffly crept up to him with a dark, tense frown. When he snarled a warning at her, the spirit stopped in her tracks, eyeing him with narrowed, knowing light brown eyes.

“You know that, of course, because you know her,” the light spirit continued. “You’ve known her for a long time.”

The dark spirit glared at Saderia’s so-called spirit guide with a testy frown and a sharp flick of his tail. “Has anyone ever told you that you have an annoying habit of getting into other animals’ business?”

The spirit rolled her eyes. “Now you sound like my brother. The evil one.” When the dark lion raised an eyebrow, she frowned and cast a cautious glance over her shoulder, then looked back to meet the ghost’s gaze with a dark, knowing scowl. “That’s why you talked to me before. You wanted to try to manipulate me to make Saderia do your bidding. You managed to convince me to keep her in the dark. Doing so actually did help her in the end, but that wasn’t why you did it. You did it so that you could hurt her later on. All because of some feud you had long ago.”

“Whoever your evil brother is, he’s right,” the dark spirit growled with a disinterested flick of his tail. “You *do* like to get into others’ business, don’t you?” With a cold flash of his eyes and a soft growl, he turned his back on her and gazed down at the image of the living world swirling in the Seeing Circle, ignoring the eyes boring into his back.

The light spirit ignored the jibe. Instead, she just stared at his back with cool, thoughtful brown eyes, her voice barely a whisper. “I could never figure out who you were and what you had to do with Saderia and Dash, but now it all makes sense.” Slowly, she raised her head to look at him, her eyes burning into his mane. “You’re Dastarius. And Dash is your son.”

In a flash, Dastarius whirled around to face her, his amber eyes blazing. “I have no son!”

The light spirit stared coolly back at him, unfazed by his booming roar. “I understand your anger,” she hissed, her voice dripping with disgust. “He refused to do your dirty work.”

Slowly, Dastarius narrowed his eyes with a dangerous growl. “You’ve already died for your insolence, Claw. I’d hate to see you suffer more for your impudence.”

Claw stared calmly back at him, hiding any hint of unease in her steady gaze. “You can’t kill what’s already dead,” she murmured. “Your threats mean nothing in the land of the dead.”

Dastarius gave her a dark, icy glare, but said nothing.

“Why don’t you just give up?” Claw murmured, letting out a soft sigh and dropping her cool voice to a softer, gentler tone. “You made a mistake, one that cost you your life. The Princess has moved on, and so should you. You’re dead, Dastarius. There’s nothing you can do.”

“I can still think, and I can still talk,” Dastarius growled, giving her a dark glare. “I see no reason why I should *act* like I’m gone when I’m not.” Before Claw could speak, he absently waved a paw to interrupt her. “No, Claw, I’m not so delusional that I believe I’m still alive. I know I no longer live in the world Princess inhabits and rules, known as ‘the living world.’ But as long as I’m here and have a direct connection with that world, I see no reason to give up.”

Claw lightly flicked her tail. “Fair enough. But just what do you plan on doing? You no longer have Dash to do your dirty work, and he won’t listen to you again. Your plan to kill Saderia already failed. And even

if it hadn't, what would you have accomplished by doing that? Did you really think you could live through your son once he took the crown? Even if you could, would you have really been satisfied with that? Yes, the Princess, your enemy, might have been gone, but you would still be dead. I'm sure it would make you feel quite thrilled to see Saderia dead, but after a few decades or so, I'm sure that thrill would wear off. What's the point of killing her if there's nothing to gain from it but a few moments of cheap thrills?"

Dastarius watched her with dark amber eyes for a long moment of silence, then turned away and let out a weary sigh. "I suppose I've underestimated you, Claw. You're smarter than you look. Yes, even I have to admit, I had my doubts about how my arrangement with my so-called son would work out." His eyes narrowed and a low growl rumbled in his throat. "But the Princess and her murdering family must die."

"It serves no purpose, though." Claw narrowed her eyes and gave him a long, knowing look. "Why waste your energy trying to kill them when you gain nothing from it?"

Dastarius's eyes flicked up to hers. For a long moment, he stared at her in silence, then raised an eyebrow and sharply flicked his tail. "I suppose you've got a point."

"Why don't you try to move on?" Claw suggested more quietly, her gaze softening. "There's no reason for you to spend the rest of eternity bitter just because you didn't get a chance to kill Saderia. It was a long time ago anyway. Let it go. It's over."

"The rest of eternity..." Dastarius let out a long sigh that ended in a dark growl. With a roll of his eyes, he turned away and scowled. "Very well, Claw. You'll get your wish to keep the Princess safe because I see no way of getting her now. My chance to kill her has already been lost, and I doubt there will be another chance anytime soon. My son is a traitor to his blood, and the Princess is just too smart. She's managed to protect herself very well throughout her adventures. What she lacks in strength, she makes up for with the sheer number of minions she calls friends that answer her every call for help and risk their pathetic lives to keep her safe. What's that one dog's name that's always fighting her battles? He's your brother, isn't he?"

Claw started to snap at him for calling them minions, then just closed her mouth and let it go. There was no point arguing.

“Anyway...” Dastarius turned his back on her and looked back at the shining Seeing Circle to gaze down at the empty forest of the living world, his eyes flashing in the dark. “Princess has built up quite the empire, to the point where she’s virtually untouchable—at least from my unfortunate vantage point. I think I’ve got no other option but to give up the chase. There’s nothing I can do anyway.”

Claw let out a soft sigh and slowly relaxed. “Good. I’m glad you realize that.” She paused and looked around at the ghostly realm surrounding them, then took a deep breath and looked back at him with gentle brown eyes, her voice softer with relief and sympathy. “In that case, I’m going to assume this is our last meeting, Dastarius. I wish you luck in finding your way.”

Dastarius flicked his tail and glanced back at her with a weak sneer. “Goodbye, Claw. You have been a worthy adversary.”

Claw dipped her head to him in farewell, then slowly turned around to walk away, her wispy light brown tail leaving a misty trail through the air behind her. In just a few short seconds, she padded out of the ghostly forest clearing and slipped past the dull, sleepy trees. Without a single sound, she disappeared into the forest, leaving the lion alone in the shadowy glade.

Narrowing his eyes, Dastarius looked away from the place where Claw had disappeared and turned his attention back to the living world, absently scanning the dark trees and grasses in a bored haze. When a flash of creamy yellow fur suddenly shot out through the shadows of the dense trees below, though, the boredom vanished and a quick spark of interest flashed in his dull amber eyes. His eyebrows leapt up. With a frown, he paused and glanced over his shoulder, then narrowed his eyes. Claw was gone.

After a tense heartbeat of hesitation, he turned back to the living world and focused on the blur of creamy fur that had darted through the trees. At once, the scene in the Circle flickered and changed, as if to zoom in on the living world. Instantly, he caught a glimpse of a sleek yellow lioness resting beside a tree in the thick, shadowy forest, her ice blue irises gleaming in the shadows and her tail flicking through the rain.

Dastarius's eyes widened in mild surprise when he realized he recognized the lioness. "Well, what do you know?" he murmured. "I never thought I'd see *her* again."

He almost changed the scenery in the Circle to a view of a different part of the forest since he didn't particularly like *her*, but something made him pause. Laid out on the wet ground in front of the lioness's paws was a strange, old-looking book. Dastarius frowned and stared harder at the old, leather-bound book under her paws. He didn't know what it was, but there was something about it that nagged at his mind. As he squinted at the ancient text, he suddenly realized what it was and let out a long hiss of irritation. With an annoyed growl and an exasperated sigh, he sat back and rolled his eyes. "Leave it to her to rob my house after I'm dead..."

Fighting back a scowl, he shook his head slowly, then turned back to look down on the lioness with bitter amber eyes. Vaguely, he recognized the book as one of the ancient texts he had kept lying uselessly around his house when he had been alive. What he didn't know was which book it was and what exactly the lioness would want with it. With a dark frown, he studied the book and the lioness closely, unable to shake off a strange sense of curiosity. The book was very, very old. That much was clear. That didn't really narrow it down, though. There had been a lot of old books in his house, all of them untouched. His father had given them to him before he had met his own death, as his father's own father had once done to him, and so on for too many generations to count. They had never been of much interest to Dastarius. He had glossed over one once and the only things written inside it had been some old ramblings from one of his ancestors. The past had never held much interest to him back then. In those days, he had been much more concerned with the present and with making himself King in the future.

Now was different. For some reason he couldn't explain, he found himself staring intently at the book, almost obsessively. He couldn't shake the feeling that there was something vitally important about that book. With tense amber eyes, he watched as the lioness opened the book to a random page frayed and yellowed by time. Feeling his paws tense with wonder, he squinted down at the ancient words on the page, hardly daring to blink as he tried to make out what they said. Disappointment kindled in his chest when he read only a few meaningless descriptions of some ancient place, but

when he scanned the words on the next page, he froze. One word jumped out at him before he even realized what he was seeing—one word that had haunted him since the day he had heard it.

Tarae.

Dastarius stared intently at the book. While history had always seemed quite boring, there was one aspect of it that fascinated him: Saderia's oldest ancestor, Queen Tarae. Compared to her, his own ancestors hadn't seemed that interesting, even though he hadn't known much about them. Queen Tarae, on the other hand, was a mystery. She was the one who had written the words on the scroll that gave an animal the power of Dreams. The power that Princess possessed. The power that he had died for.

His eyes narrowed. Why would one of his books mention the name of the oldest Queen in the history of the forest? And did it have any information about her?

Dastarius let out a hiss of frustration when the lioness turned the page, effectively destroying his view of the words written on it. His tail gave an irritable flick. Not being able to control when pages were turned was one of the many, many grievances of being dead. When he caught a glimpse of the old Queen's name on the next page, though, his frustration vanished instantly and his ears pricked up with interest. He had just enough time to make out one sentence before the infuriating lioness closed the book: *The Organization will rise again in a new millennium to destroy Queen Tarae and her descendants.*

Princess? Dastarius blinked several times as the lioness took the book from his view, making his hatred for her shoot up to a whole new level. Ignoring his annoyance, he thought about the sentence in utter confusion. Queen Tarae's descendants...meant Princess Saderia. Who else? What was 'the Organization,' though? *And how could it destroy Princess?*

Dastarius took a few steps back and looked around at the sleepy forest suspiciously. Maybe his ancestors were more interesting than he'd thought. After a quick glance around at the dark glade to make sure he was alone, he looked back at the Seeing Circle and hunched over it, letting the strands of his pitch black mane fall over the sphere as if to hide it from prying eyes. In a flash, he willed the scene in the Circle to change to a vision of his old, dilapidated house left abandoned in its clearing. As soon as the scene flickered into place, he stared down at the house, wondering if

the lioness had left the other books alone. If she had, then did any of the remaining books contain any information about this ‘Organization’ within their pages? And if so, was there any way it could help him? His tail lashed anxiously across the dull green grass. Every part of him longed to go to the living world to investigate, but there was one problem: he couldn’t touch things in the living world. If he could, he would have killed the Princess himself a long time ago, but that was a different problem. In addition to hindering him when it came to killing his enemy, it also prevented him from lifting ancient books and turning their pages.

Dastarius hissed in fury, then instantly fell silent, his mind whirling with a sudden rush of wild, frantic thoughts and plans. A faint sneer tugged at the corners of his mouth. Perhaps Dash wouldn’t listen to him anymore when it came to commanding him to kill the Princess...but that didn’t mean Dastarius couldn’t still manipulate him to do other things for him. Not if he really tried.

With a wide, satisfied sneer, Dastarius slowly sat back and gazed out at the ghostly forest around him, his amber eyes gleaming in the dim light. Claw was wrong. It wasn’t over. Not yet. As long as he could still speak to the living, it was never over.

Dastarius’s eyes grew wide with wonder and possibility as new understanding sunk in. For the first time, he truly realized that he had actually been visiting his son and speaking to him for the past few weeks, both in dreams of the spirit world *and* in the living world. Normally, his son would never have been able to see him, much less hear him. So how exactly *had* he been able to visit him? Was it because...the Princess had some way of spreading her ghost-seeing powers to others?

Dastarius’s tail began to flick rapidly across the dirt and his eyes lit up with excitement. A cold sneer crept across his face. If that was true, he still had a chance. If he could just learn more about the past and Princess’s powers, he could destroy her once and for all. He could become the true King!

With a shiver of excitement, he looked away from the Seeing Circle and glanced back over his shoulder at the place where Claw had disappeared. Slowly, a wide, triumphant smirk tugged up the corners of his mouth. “It’s not over yet, Claw. I’m not truly dead. If I can still think, I can still plan. And if I can still talk, then no one is safe...”

Raindrops slicked the hard, forbidding walls and rocky ledges of the stone hollow by the time the lioness returned to her home. With practiced ease, she leapt down from the top ridge of the hollow in the ground and lunged down to each jutting, stony outcropping. In a flash, she leapt lower and lower from ledge to ledge until she skidded to a stop on a drenched ledge just beneath a shadowy stone wall with a large hole carved into it—the entrance to her home. With a grin, the lioness slithered into the tiny cave, shaking water droplets from her creamy fur. Inside the dark, dank crevice in the stone, she glided smoothly over to the back wall and stopped to look down at the pictures she had carved into the floor.

The etchings resembled a game board, one similar to the childish games she had played as a cub and probably similar to the ones the Princess had played just a few years ago. Only this game was not for children. One of the drawings depicted the hollow she lived in, with specific emphasis on the sharp, piercing rocks rising up on the very bottom. Just like in real life, the spikes jutted up in her drawing, just waiting to impale anyone who took a wrong step or lost their footing. Other pictures around the game board showed other violent fates—fates that would soon become the Princess's destiny. It was a fairly simple game actually. There was a starting point and an ending point. The Princess and whatever little friends she happened to drag down with her would begin at the starting point. After that, they would follow along the game board and face the violent challenges and fates the lioness had planned. If they happened to survive one challenge, they would move on to the next one, and then the next one, and so on until they were finally dead. The goal wasn't for them to win the game, after all. Just finish.

The lioness had been thinking long and hard about how she would exact her revenge against the Princess. She had had a lot of time to think about it. After some thought, she had decided that a game was the best way to take care of her. After all, what was revenge without a little fun? And besides, the Princess seemed to treat her lucky little life like one big, happy game, so what better way for her to die than in the way she lived?

Rain dripped down the spiky, sinister stones jutting up on the bottom of the hollow just outside the shadowy cavern with a soft gurgling noise. The lioness's tail gave an extra forceful flick when a crash boomed outside. Just beyond her cave, a stream of thick, enormous rocks tumbled

down the ledges, cracking apart with each outcropping they hit. While thunder roared in the stormy night, the rocks crashed down to the bottom of the hollow and cracked against the jutting stones with a harsh crash, shattering into millions of tiny pieces. With ice blue eyes that pierced through the stormy darkness, the lioness stared at the hollow beyond her cave and hesitated, then silently rose to her paws, rolling a kink out of her neck. Slowly, she sidled up to the entrance of the cavern and looked down as a thunderous crash rocked the forest, making every rock in the hollow shudder.

The lioness grinned down at the drenched hollow, imagining the first challenge that would befall the Princess. She could just picture the Princess enjoying the days leading up to her doom—playing with her friends, going to school, having carefree dreams at night. She hoped the Princess enjoyed her last few days. It would make revenge so much sweeter to see the Princess's reaction when her peaceful life was snatched away from her and destroyed

A slow smile curled up the corners of her mouth in a bloodthirsty grin. "I swore revenge, Princess. And I'll get it. Pretty soon, you'll be just another pawn in my games."

Chapter Two

Bad Dreams

“Kill her.”

A low voice snarled through the darkness, sending shivers down Saderia’s spine. Her whole body trembled with terror as her back legs writhed through nothing but open air. Her front claws scabbled desperately to keep their weak hold on the edge of a thick, rocky platform towering high over the earth. Frantically, she struggled to pull herself up onto the massive ledge, but couldn’t no matter how hard she tried. Pain burned in her paws from holding on so tightly. All around her, curling through the air like smoke, was the thick, rancid scent of blood. Beneath her was nothing but an angry red sea of gore. Her eyes went wide with panic and her mouth gaped open in a wild scream of terror.

Glittering dark brown eyes stared down into hers, gleaming with triumph and dark amusement. “Throw her to her death!”

Rock’s commanding howl rang through the air. Her mother’s scream echoed through the darkness all around the rock, chillingly loud but so far away. Amber eyes flashed through the darkness without warning and locked onto hers, glinting with wild, sadistic joy.

Dastarius sneered. “Hello again, Princess.”

Dash. Another pair of bright amber eyes. His face flickered into view from within the shadows. From where she hung on the edge of the rock, Saderia could just barely see him towering over her. Only his flashing eyes could be seen through the shadows, locked onto hers. Slowly, he started to step backward into the darkness, his eyes glowing brighter but his face growing darker and darker. Saderia’s claws scabbled desperately on the rock, about to lose their grip. “Dash!” she screamed. “Help me!” But as she watched, Dash only got farther and farther away until the shadows covered even his glowing amber eyes, turning them to darkness.

A deafening snarl boomed out somewhere beyond Dash on the rock as a harsh, furious growl rang through the air. “I’ll make sure you really are

dead this time!" Dingo's earsplitting howl of pain burst out from somewhere just out of Saderia's sight, raising all the fur along her back and making her breath catch in her throat.

"Don't kill him!" Her desperate cry exploded into a scream of pure terror when her claws slipped on the rock. Before she could react, the stony ledge crumbled right beneath her paws, sending her plummeting down through the bloody air with nothing to grab onto. A wild, desperate scream tore out of her mouth as she twisted through the air.

"*Dash!*" But he was only getting farther and farther away. "Don't kill him!" she screamed. "Dash! Don't kill me!"

Down she fell with the sounds of the battle, Dingo's howl, and her mother's scream echoing in her ears. She squeezed her eyes shut just as she plunged into the bright red ocean of blood. Her last scream died away in a dull gurgle of blood.

Saderia's eyes flew open. She didn't move. Her whole body felt tense and her breath caught in her throat. With wide, panicked amber eyes, she glanced wildly around the darkened room surrounding her bed, searching for hidden enemies. Even in the safety of her own room, far away from the desert, she could still feel Rock's hot, putrid breath on her face as he leered down at her, waiting to strike at any sign of movement. Maybe if she just lay still and didn't move, he and whatever other unseen enemies hid in the shadows would go away.

A shiver raced down her spine. Images of the blood-soaked dream swirled through her mind, making the shadows around her bed and the rest of her usually comforting room seem sinister. Digging her claws deep into her soft blue blanket and feeling her heart skip with fear, she opened her mouth to call out Dash's name, then paused when an awful sense of doubt stopped her. Her dream flashed through her mind before she could stop it and a shiver raced down her spine. Even though she knew better, in the thick darkness of her room, she couldn't help but remember how Dash had stood beside Dastarius in her dream, so eerily similar to him...and watched her fall to her death.

Saderia winced and fiercely shook her head. No, *that* part was just a dream! That hadn't happened in real life.

Saderia took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Reluctantly, she made herself loosen her grip on the blanket and glanced around at her dark, silent room with narrowed amber eyes. She knew it was ridiculous, but she couldn't shake the feeling that there was someone in there, watching her, just waiting to strike. Part of her wanted to call Dash the way she always did when her sleep was shattered by nightmares, but she just couldn't shake off the unease she felt around him or the hesitation she felt about calling him to her. After all that had happened, the thought of him only brought more nervousness, not comfort.

Regret burned in her heart. Before, she and her best friend had been so close. Now she couldn't even call him to comfort her when she felt afraid. And if she couldn't call Dash, she couldn't call anyone to help her. If she could, she would have called her other friend Dingo to come calm her down and make sure there was nothing in the room with her, but Dingo was miles away in the desert beyond her forest. Another one of her friends, Jeb, lived slightly closer—at least in the same land that she lived in—but his house was still too far away to seek out his help. Besides, although she cared about Jeb, she knew he probably wouldn't be able to help her with her fears. Unlike Dingo, who wasn't afraid of *anything*, Jeb was afraid of *everything*.

Shaking off her thoughts, Saderia took a deep breath and forced herself to calm down and realize her fears were silly, even though she still felt uneasy. It was nothing new. For the past month, she had been waking up in a panic after a rash of horrible nightmares. No matter how hard she tried, she just couldn't shake off the fears and worries haunting her mind, and every night, the same horrible nightmares replayed over and over again.

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly, reminding herself that everything was fine. Her mother was safe...the forest and the outcasts were safe...Dingo was Leader...Rock was dead...the war was over. Slowly, Saderia leaned back in her bed and took a few deep breaths, reminding herself that all the turmoil and trouble had passed and that she had no reason to fear any longer. Still, it was hard to tell herself that everything was okay when the war had ended only four weeks ago.

The war had been fought with the desert. The forest animals and the former dingo outcasts had joined forces to take down the previous dingo Leader, Rock, who had ruled the pack with cruelty and fear. During the war,

Saderia had discovered that Rock had kidnapped her mother, Queen Karenisha, after she had run away from her family in an act of reckless fear and hopelessness. Rock had planned to use his capture of Karenisha to take over the forest, and Saderia had had no choice but to let him in order to save her mother's life. After that, she had formed a plan to attack and eliminate Rock with Dash, the dark lion who had been her best friend for what felt like her whole life and who had accompanied her on all of her adventures; Dingo, a troubled and grumpy canine from the desert; Jeb, a strange, timid creature from a strange forest; and Thunder, Rock's old, exiled Second in Command, the outcasts' old Leader, and Dingo's current Second in Command. Her father, King Makero, had also helped cultivate the plan.

The battle plan had started out rocky and extremely risky, but in the end, it had all turned out better than she had expected. Rock was killed for his crimes, the outcasts were freed from Rock's oppression, Dingo became Leader of the pack, Thunder became his Second in Command, Karenisha was freed, rule of the forest was returned to Saderia's royal family, and the desert and the forest finally became allies at peace with one another. It seemed like a clean victory, but there were darker issues lurking just under the surface—issues that Saderia was only now aware of.

While she, the rest of her friends, and the entire kingdom had been focused on finding her mother and stopping Rock, Dash had been visiting his father, Dastarius, in dreams. Dastarius had been killed a long time ago when he had attempted to kill Saderia and her family and take over the forest, but he had somehow managed to visit Dash as a spirit. Throughout the war, Dastarius had been visiting Dash and trying to change him to make him crueler and more ruthless—more like Dastarius himself. His plan had been to brainwash Dash so that when the final battle came, Dash would kill her. His plan had failed because Dash hadn't killed her, but she still couldn't help but feel uneasy around her friend now. Part of her told her that she should forgive Dash because she knew from experience just how easy it was to believe Dastarius's lies, but another part of her warned her that if Dash could trust Dastarius so easily once, he could do it again. And the next time it happened, the results might not be so good. Dastarius was Dash's father, after all, and Saderia knew that tie was still strong.

In the days after the battle, Dash had told her everything Dastarius had told him and explained just what had been going on. For the most part,

she was grateful that he had come clean, but she couldn't help but wonder if there were still a few things he was hiding from her. After all, he *had* hidden the fact that Dastarius had been visiting him for weeks.

Forcefully, she shook the thoughts from her head, not wanting to think about Dash and his undetermined loyalties. Unfortunately, the second she stopped thinking about one of her friends, she couldn't help but start worrying about another. Dingo. It had been a month since she had last seen him, and that was only just after the battle had ended and he had been crowned Leader of the pack. Before he had led the dingoes out of the forest to bring them back home to the desert, he had informed her that he would move the camp closer to the forest so that they could visit each other more often. Even so, he felt oddly far away. During the battle, the dingoes had trusted him and even looked up to him, but she couldn't help but wonder how he was faring as their Leader now, a month after all the excitement had died down. He was only twelve, after all, just two years older than she was, and although Saderia knew the dingoes picked their Leaders extremely young, the pressure seemed intense. She hoped Dingo would be able to handle his new responsibilities and that the pack wouldn't give him any problems.

Letting out a long sigh and pushing the thoughts away, Saderia slowly pushed back her blanket and climbed out of her bed, trying to shake off the fear lingering from her nightmare. Without a sound, she darted hastily through the shadows covering her room and slipped out through the door, not daring to look back into the darkness for fear of what she might see. A shiver raced down her spine when she crept out into the cold, darkened hallway, but she made herself ignore the sinister shadows and quickly darted down it.

When she cautiously crept out past the archway at the end of the hallway into the shadows darkening the wide front room of the house, her eyes instantly snapped to the new furniture lined up along the walls. For the most part, the new pieces of furniture were almost identical to the old. The only reason she could even tell the furniture was new was because she distinctly remembered the old furniture being destroyed in the war. A shiver raced through her at the thought. Her own house had been used as a prison and torture chamber after Rock had taken over the forest. Dingo had once

been imprisoned in these very walls, along with other forest animals, dingoes, and her own family members.

Right before the final battle in the desert had been fought, Saderia had led an army to her house to break in and free the prisoners. Stationed inside the house were Rock's strong, burly followers, placed there to guard the prison against any rescue attempts. A massive battle had ensued. While Saderia and her army had fought off enemy forces outside the house, Dingo had managed to free himself inside. Once he had released the other prisoners, he had led them in battle against Rock's guards and commanded them to victory. After the captives had been freed and the battle at the prison won, most of the prisoners had joined Saderia's army on the march to the final battle to attack and eliminate Rock once and for all.

After the war had ended, Saderia and her family had returned home to a destroyed house. There hadn't been one piece of furniture that had survived the battle. Almost every window in the house had been shattered along with every piece of furniture they had, leaving the floor covered in a thick layer of sharp, glinting glass and splinter-ridden debris. Cleaning up the mess had taken days, but Saderia had hardly cared about the destroyed property. Not when she'd had to clean up something much more disturbing: blood. In many rooms of the house, the floor had been stained with blood from the prisoners Rock had tortured. The bloodiest spot in the house had been right in the middle of the front room where Dingo had been held prisoner, isolated from the others. Knowing that one of her closest friends had been tortured in her own house, she now avoided the front room as much as possible to try to avoid thinking about it. She knew it would be a long time before she felt comfortable in her own home again without being tormented by thoughts of the horrible things that had happened there.

Still, even with those thoughts swirling through her mind, when she gazed out past the archway to the hallway on the other side of the front room, she couldn't help but smile. In one of the rooms along the darkened hallway, her mother and father would be sleeping peacefully in their bed now that her mother was finally back in her old home, safe and sound. The thought made her feel warm with relief.

After the Queen had returned to the forest, she had been taken to doctors to heal her wounds and especially her broken legs. As soon as she had recovered, she had returned to her old home where she had slowly

grown stronger and started to adjust to reality again. Due to a catastrophic series of events a long time ago, Karenisha had believed that her family members—Makero, Saderia, and Dash—were dead, which had caused her to leave the forest they had been living in at the time. After Rock had captured her, she had still believed it. It had taken her some time to get used to the reality that her whole family was alive and well and that everything was back to normal, but she was slowly getting better. Every day, she seemed to become more and more like the noble Queen she used to be.

Saderia smiled a soft smile, then turned and walked across the wide front room toward the front door of her house, trying to suppress a shiver. More than anything, she just needed to be outside. Her home didn't feel like her home anymore. That odd, unsettling feeling of being out of her element in her own home had lingered in her heart for a long time now. At first, she had hoped it would go away, but the feeling had stayed and now she could no longer deny that she felt better when she was traveling the world, surrounded by her three friends, braving the dangers the adventure threw at her, than when she was living safely at home. The only home she knew was in the stars above her, the one thing that never changed no matter where she went.

When she slipped out past the doorway into the frigid night air, she almost jumped. A dark brown lion sat just outside the front door with his back turned to her. His messy dark brown mane rustled in the soft wind whispering through the pitch black clearing and his tail twitched tensely across the dark, dew-soaked grass. Not noticing her quiet paw steps, he stared absently up at the starry night sky, never making a sound.

Saderia blinked in surprise, then frowned, suppressing a shiver from the frosty wind rustling her fur. She hesitated, then cautiously stepped up behind him, raising her voice to a whisper. "Dash?"

At the sound of her voice, the dark lion tensed and instantly whirled around to face her, his amber eyes wide with alarm. When he caught sight of her surprised face, he froze, then slowly relaxed, though his fur still bristled with unease. A tense, wary frown crossed his face. "Saderia? What are you doing out here?"

Saderia narrowed her eyes, then slowly stepped forward to stand beside him. When she sat down next to him and let her fur brush his, she almost instantly tensed, then silently cursed herself. She hated the fact that

she felt so awkward around Dash now, but she couldn't shake off her discomfort. Looking away, she gazed up at the twinkling stars with a tense frown and merely shrugged. "I couldn't sleep."

Dash cast her a quick glance out of the corner of his eye, then hastily looked away, seeming to sense her unease. "Me neither," he murmured. "I keep having dreams. I mean..." His eyes widened in alarm and he frantically whipped around to face her, his fur bristling with panic. "Normal dreams! Like...nightmares...That's all."

Saderia glanced at him out of the corner of her eye and suppressed a sigh. It was clear that he was afraid she would think he was visiting Dastarius if he dared say anything related to 'dreams.' And as much as she hated to admit it and knew it wasn't true, that was the first thought her mind had jumped to. Biting back a pang of regret and trying to seem oblivious to his panic, she stared at the stars and let out a quiet breath. "I'm having dreams, too."

Dash paused and studied her carefully, his eyes narrowing with curiosity. He hesitated for a long moment, then tipped his head to the side with a cautious frown. "They're not...*Dreams*...right?"

Saderia let out a sigh and kept her gaze locked on the stars, her eyes dulling with weariness. She knew what he meant by 'Dreams.' 'Dreams' were a mysterious power that gave Saderia the ability to see the future in her nightmares. The cryptic Dreams had haunted her sleep for a long time and had guided her through plenty of her adventures, but she always had a difficult time interpreting their complex and confusing messages.

"No," she murmured. "They're not Dreams. They're just normal nightmares...you know...about Rock...and the battle..."

Dash let out a sympathetic sigh and looked away. "That's what my dreams are about, too," he muttered. "I wish I could stop having those nightmares. I mean, it's been a month..."

Saderia cast him a quick side-glance and sighed. She would love to assure him that those dreams would eventually go away forever, but she wouldn't believe her own words. The nightmares would fade in time, but they would never truly disappear. The horrors of the war would stay with her for a long time, and she was sure that no matter how much time passed, she would still see the terrors of the war in her sleep every once in a while to remind her that the memories hadn't faded.

Every part of her longed to share those fears with Dash. She wished she could tell him how she really felt. How, despite the bone-chilling terror the nightmares left her with, they could never compare to the true horrors of the war. How the screams of the dying fighters in the battles would never quite leave her ears and how the fates of everyone who had lost their lives would never quite leave her conscience. How much it haunted her now that she realized how close she had been to death when she had been on the edge of that rock, hanging on for dear life, just seconds away from falling to a horrible, painful death. How in unoccupied moments, she couldn't stop herself from imagining what would have happened had everything played out differently—had Rock gotten his way—to the point of scaring herself into a shaky, frightened mess.

A twinge of despair stirred in her heart. The old Saderia would have been able to share anything with Dash. Now she couldn't even muster up the courage or find the trust in him to speak a word of her fears. All she could do was keep her worries to herself and hope with all her heart that the tension between her and her friend would clear up soon. Instead of giving life to those fears, she decided to change the subject. "I've been worried about Dingo. I think we should go see him tomorrow. Or sometime soon."

Dash looked up at her out of the corner of his eye and something that looked like regret flashed in his amber irises. Just as soon as it flickered in his eyes, it faded away and he turned away from her to stare emotionlessly back at the stars. "Yeah, sure," he muttered, his voice soft and tense. "That would be fine. As long as Karenisha and Makero are okay with it."

Saderia winced and lowered her eyes to the ground. Ever since she had been shaken by the supposed deaths of her family members, Karenisha had seemed to fear for Saderia's life every time she left her sight. It might be difficult to convince the Queen that she would be safe while she was gone. Then again, perhaps she could just take her parents with her. It wasn't as if she was setting off on a secret journey again, and the King and Queen of the forest would probably want to see how the new Leader of the desert was faring. The forest and the desert were allies, after all.

Shaking off her thoughts, she glanced at Dash, then just looked back at the stars with a faint, curt nod. "Good. I'm sure we'll convince them somehow."

Dash just nodded without a word.

The two of them sat in awkward silence for a long, tense moment, staring up at the starry sky with guarded amber eyes and never daring to look at each other. After several heartbeats of thick silence, Saderia couldn't take the tension any longer. With a weary sigh, she rose to her paws and started to turn away, avoiding looking at Dash. Letting out a fake yawn, she started to walk back toward the door, flicking her tail at him as she passed. "I should get back to sleep. You too."

Dash looked back quickly and opened his mouth to say something, then closed it and instead just looked away with dark, weary eyes, reluctantly nodding his head. "Okay."

Without looking back at him, Saderia just nodded and stepped closer to the door. Behind her, Dash sat hunched over the grass, his eyes dark and his claws nervously kneading the ground. Anxiously, he bit his lip, as if wanting to say something, but didn't say a word. Saderia didn't notice. Avoiding looking at him, she stepped up to the door and reached out to open it. Just as her paw touched the doorknob, Dash let out a heavy sigh and quickly whipped around, his eyes wide with misery and desperation. Before she could slip inside, he let out a frantic call. "Saderia, wait!"

Saderia paused in front of the door, her eyes widening in surprise. When she turned back around to face him, she had just enough time to see the flash of fear and pain in his eyes before he blurted out the words in one quick, frantic rush. "Do you trust me?"

The instant he said it, he froze. His eyes went wide with shock and he clamped a paw over his mouth, as if hardly believing what he had just said. Barely daring to breathe, he stumbled back a pace with wild, bristling fur, terrified of how she would react.

A long, uneasy silence spread out between them. Saderia blinked once, then stared back at him with narrowed, guarded amber eyes, not saying a word. Neither of them spoke. After several long, uncomfortable beats of awkward silence, Saderia merely looked away with shadowed eyes and gave him a curt nod. "Yes." In a voice empty of any hint of emotion, she muttered the single word to the ground. Not 'Yes, of course I trust you! You're my best friend!' or some other words that would show any actual emotion or truth. Just 'yes.'

"Okay," Dash said in the same detached voice. And that was it.

Without a word, Saderia turned around and stepped inside as the last shining sliver of moon vanished behind a cluster of dark clouds.

Dash watched the door swing shut behind Saderia, his amber eyes clouded with sadness. When it finally slammed shut, he let out a long sigh and turned away, lifting his gaze back to the sky. His heart felt heavy with sorrow and defeat. As he stared up at the stars, he couldn't help but wonder if Dastarius was watching him, even after a month had passed without so much as a hint of him returning. The thought made his fur bristle, and a low snarl rumbled in his throat. "This is your fault," he growled, his eyes flashing in the darkness and his claws scoring the dirt beneath him.

As he seethed, he half expected Dastarius to appear out of thin air to scold him in that usual sneering way of his, but he didn't. The clearing remained as empty as ever. Dash's eyes narrowed. He wasn't sure what he hated more—the fact that Dastarius hadn't shown up or the fact that he had almost wanted him to. "Coward," he muttered under his breath.

Taking a deep breath, he let it out slowly, then sank down to his belly and buried his face between his paws. Everything had turned into such a mess. Everyone else thought everything was so much better now, and so many things *had* been resolved in the war, but he couldn't help but feel that everything that had happened over the past few weeks had been nothing but one big mistake after another. After all, he and Saderia had barely said one word to each other in an entire month. There was nothing to say. They didn't trust each other anymore. He couldn't blame her, though. It was his fault, not hers.

Feeling his face burn with shame, Dash thought back to all the times he had visited his father in dreams, both before and during the war between Rock and the forest animals and the outcasts. He honestly couldn't fathom how he had let himself believe that Dastarius had changed—that he had truly become a good animal, that he had really *cared*—when clearly he hadn't. He was even cautious in the beginning! How had he let himself fall for his father's manipulative lies?

Dash groaned. He knew very well why he had fallen for it. It was because, despite everything, Dastarius was still his father and some part of him still wanted Dastarius to like him even though he never had before. Dash really hated that part of himself. What he hated even more was the

fact that even after all that had happened—even after he had realized that Dastarius was just using him to try to get revenge against Saderia—he still wished he could visit him again. He didn’t know what the point of that would be. What did he expect Dastarius to do? Apologize for trying to use him to kill Saderia? Pretend like he had changed again even though he hadn’t? Dash couldn’t think of any reason why he would *ever* want to see Dastarius again, but he couldn’t help the feeling.

Sometimes Dash wondered if he wanted to see Dastarius just so he could tell him to leave. Just so he could say to his face, ‘I’m not going to listen to you again. I won’t trust you again. I’m on Saderia’s side. Leave me alone.’ As if actually saying those words to his father would make everything all better. Even now, he longed for a chance to say that to Dastarius, if not to order him to never try to use him again than to prove to himself that he couldn’t be used.

Either way, he knew that wouldn’t really help the situation. It didn’t matter that Dastarius was still as evil as always or that he would never truly care about Dash. Dash didn’t want to care about him anyway. The only thing that mattered anymore was showing Saderia that she could trust him again. Thankfully, she had been kind enough to let him explain what had happened with Dastarius after they had returned from battle. At the time, she hadn’t seemed to hate him for it, but ever since then, they had barely spoken at all. About anything. Even if she said she did, Dash could tell she didn’t trust him anymore.

Whenever they were alone together, he always felt this horrible tension between them. Any time they were around each other now, both he and Saderia couldn’t help but feel uncomfortable, always wondering what the other thought about them. Or at least that’s what he wondered. He never knew what was on her mind anymore. The dinner that had been held just after the war to celebrate Karenisha’s homecoming—an occasion that should have been hopeful and joyous—had quickly turned awkward when the tension between him and Saderia hadn’t gone away. Even Karenisha and Makero had seemed to sense it, though they probably had no idea what it was about. Saderia had been kind enough not to tell them about Dastarius’s dream visits.

Ever since that day, it had been difficult to even be in the same room as Saderia, much less talk to her. Whenever she was near him, he couldn’t

help but wonder what she was thinking—what she might think of him now, whether she might turn on him, or if she actually hated him. The paranoia drove him crazy. Was she looking at him because she wanted to talk to him or was she trying to read his expression to see if he was hiding something again? Was she avoiding his gaze because something had caught her eye or because she wanted to hide her doubts from him? Did she excuse herself from the table because she really wasn't hungry or because she wanted to get away from him? Did she wake up terrified because her nightmares had been about the war or about him?

The noticeable lack of time spent with Dingo and Jeb didn't help the situation. Dingo's existence in and of itself didn't help either, but that was another matter. His absence, along with Jeb's, only made things worse. Since the war had ended, Saderia and Dash had barely had anything to do with Dingo or Jeb. They hadn't seen or talked to Dingo in a month, and they had only spoken to Jeb once or twice. Dingo was off in the desert leading the pack, while Jeb was holed up in his house, grounded by his parents who were constantly afraid he would run off again.

That meant that for the whole month, it had been just him and Saderia. Without any other friends to hang around with, the tension had only grown worse. Since Dingo and Jeb weren't there to be her friends, Dash couldn't just check out and try to pull himself back together. He constantly felt like he should always be with her, always talk to her, and act like more of a friend, but he just didn't know how to get up the nerve to do all of that. If Dingo and Jeb had been around, at least he and Saderia would have been able to distract themselves from the growing tension between them by talking or playing with their other friends. The fact that Dash *wanted* Dingo and Jeb to be around all the time was discouraging in itself. Before, he knew he would have loved any time alone with Saderia. The fact that he hated it now just proved how bad things had become.

Speaking of things that made him feel horrible, he was starting to really dislike Dingo. In all fairness, Dingo's grouchy mood could get on anyone's nerves, but in one month—a month in which Dash hadn't talked to him *once*—he already disliked him more than he ever could if the canine had been hanging around all the time. He didn't know why he didn't like Dingo. All he knew was that it really bugged him how Saderia was so excited to visit him. For the past few weeks, whenever they did try to talk,

the only thing she ever seemed to mention was how eager she was to see Dingo or how disappointed she was that she hadn't gotten a chance to visit him already. Dash tried not to let it bother him, but he couldn't help but feel annoyed. It wasn't as if Dingo had been gone for *years*. And he wasn't that great in the first place.

Dash sighed and shook the thoughts out of his head. He knew he shouldn't hate Dingo, but he wanted to. It didn't matter, though. He still had to go with Saderia when they visited him the next day, and he would still have to act like his friend. If he didn't, Saderia would be upset, and he didn't want that.

Taking a deep breath, Dash slowly pushed himself to his paws and turned to slip back toward the house to try to get some more sleep. A good few hours still stood between now and morning. He didn't want to sleep. The same horrifying nightmares always just seemed to repeat over and over again whenever he closed his eyes—images of Dastarius laughing on the ledge, Rock's smirking face, Saderia hurtling from the rock. Still, he knew he needed sleep.

With one last look at the cloudy, starry sky, he closed the door behind him and turned to walk to his room. He passed Saderia's room without a sound and didn't bother to check to see if she was still awake.

The first thing Saderia noticed when she stepped out into the sunlit dining room the next morning was her mother's smile. A faint smile crept across her own face. Even after spending the last few hours of the night trapped in nightmares, she couldn't help but feel a glimmer of warmth in her heart. Blinking sleep out of her eyes and trying not to wince when she passed the place in the front room where Dingo had been tortured, she stepped past the archway into the dining room and let out a soft, relieved sigh. Any day that her mother was smiling and happy was a good day, even if her nightmares had left her feeling weak and exhausted.

Saderia's father, Makero, sat on the left side of the gold dining room table. A plate piled with food sat in front of him, but he barely spared a glance at it. His narrowed green eyes were locked on Saderia's mother, gleaming with equal amounts of happiness and concern. By the fanciful railing separating the kitchen and the dining room on the left side of the small room, Saderia's aunt, Cia, led her twin sister over to the table, resting

her tail gently on her shoulder and keeping her worried blue eyes locked on the Queen. With a bright smile, Saderia's mother followed Cia into the dining room and sat down beside Makero, her amber eyes shining with life and happiness. With her seated, Cia padded around to sit on the far end of the table, across from Saderia's uncle, Jash.

Only two seats were left on the right side of the table—one for her and one for Dash, allowing them to sit side by side. To her dismay, Saderia realized she was actually dreading having to sit beside him. Hiding her troubled thoughts, she stepped out into the dining room and hopped up onto the seat across from her mother in front of a plate of food that had already been placed. To her relief, when she looked up at Karenisha, the Queen's amber eyes were shining brightly and a weak smile lit up her face. The warm, happy expression that brightened the room was the same look Karenisha had worn for the past few weeks once she had truly realized that her family was really alive and safe. Saderia tried to tell herself that she shouldn't be so surprised to find her mother happy, but she couldn't quite get the images of her mother with dull, defeated eyes, listless fur, and a dead stare out of her mind. Those were the images that haunted her nightmares.

Pushing the memories away, Saderia forced her smile to remain in place as she gazed up at her mother. Nightmares or not, she didn't have to fake the joy and relief in her tone. "Hi, Mom!" she called, lifting her tail in greeting. "How was your sleep?"

Karenisha smiled a warm, glowing smile. "Good. How was yours?"

"Good," Saderia lied. "Peaceful." At the sound of soft paw steps, she looked up just in time to see Dash stumble through the archway into the dining room, his eyelids drooping with exhaustion and his mane messier than usual. When he heard her answer to Karenisha's question, he looked up sharply with eyes bright with disbelief. His stunned amber eyes met hers for half a second before Saderia looked away. Clearing her throat, she gazed absently down at her plate and picked at her food, trying to avoid Dash's gaze.

In the archway, Dash looked down awkwardly, his fur bristling with discomfort. With a tense frown, he hastily stumbled over to the table and took his seat, trying to avoid Saderia's eyes. As soon as he sat down, he scooted his chair closer to the edge of the table, as far away from her as

possible. With a pang of regret, Saderia realized she had done the same thing the moment he had sat down without even knowing it. Trying not to wince, she looked away from the gap between them and awkwardly picked at her food. She hoped her family hadn't noticed.

"So are you two excited?" At the sound of Makero's voice, Saderia looked up to see the King watching them with bright green eyes and a wide smile. "Repairs to the school are finally complete. Starting tomorrow, you two can finally go back to school to see Loki, Ms. Spot, and all the others."

Saderia's eyes widened in shock. When Makero stared back at her with a smile, expecting a reaction, she managed to force up a weak smile even though her heart skipped with disbelief at the thought. School was such a foreign concept to her by now that she barely even remembered it existed. Or was supposed to exist.

Dash was a little less discreet. With a gasp of surprise, he snapped his head up to face Makero, his eyes wide and his fur bristling with shock. "What?"

Instantly, Makero and the other tigers seated around the table blinked and turned to face him in surprise. When he realized everyone was staring at him, Dash blinked several times, then shrank back in his chair with a tense, uncomfortable frown. "I mean, uh...it's just surprising...We haven't been to school in months..." He trailed off with a sigh and tried to shake his mane out over his face as discreetly as possible, hoping to hide from their prying eyes. At the very least, he didn't want to *see* them all staring at him. Even as he hid from the animals he used to call family, he felt a flash of anxiety. He wasn't ready to go back to school and deal with the other animals again. Not when there was still all this tension and conflict in his own home.

While Saderia glanced at him out of the corner of her eye and tried not to grin, Makero let out a soft chuckle. Raising an eyebrow, the King glanced back and forth between them and shook his head with a grin. "So you two are a little...less than excited about this, huh?"

Saderia shrugged, unable to hide a grin. "I guess after taking down an evil overlord, algebra just doesn't seem as important."

Makero and Uncle Jash let out hearty laughs, while Karenisha giggled to herself. On the far end of the table, Cia rolled her eyes and stuck her nose up with a sniff. "Honestly!" Even Dash managed to smile at that.

Saderia tried to hide a grin. Letting out a soft breath, she forced herself to take on a more serious, thoughtful expression. “Either way, it’ll still be nice to see Loki and Lisa again. I haven’t seen them since the war. I hope they’re doing okay.”

“We haven’t seen Lizzie and Lily in forever,” Dash added, making himself look up at Saderia. “Except for maybe a few times back in Jeb’s forest. It’ll be weird seeing them in school again.” He paused and thought about what he’d just said, feeling his heart skip. Was that the right thing to say? It seemed innocent enough. It was just a statement about some old friends. Pretty safe...he hoped.

Saderia nodded enthusiastically, then let out a weary sigh. “Yeah, you’re right. I want to see how they’re doing, as well. After all, Lizzie only has half a tail, and now that everything’s getting back to normal, I wonder if she’ll be okay.”

Dash nodded silently and tried to change the subject to something happier, trying to avoid her eyes. “What about Ms. Spot? She’s probably doing well.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” Saderia smiled a brighter, more eager smile. “I’m sure everyone at school is doing great.”

Makero smiled. “I’m glad you’re starting to like the idea, Saderia, because there’s something I need you to take care of for me.”

Saderia glanced up at him in surprise and frowned. “Like what?”

“Jeb.” When Saderia simply blinked in response, Makero let out a quiet breath and gave her a long, knowing look. “I talked to Telku and Jati, Jeb’s parents, just a few days ago and helped them enroll Jeb in your school. He’s going to need the same education as you two if he and his family want to live in this forest. He’s probably going to need some help adjusting to school and everything else, so I talked to Principal Delaca to have him specifically placed in the same grade and class as you and Dash. I only ask that the two of you show him around and help him get used to school. I imagine he’ll probably be a bit nervous around the other students —‘strange creatures’—so it might be a bit overwhelming.”

“Of course.” Saderia nodded enthusiastically and smiled. “We’ll help him settle in. No problem.”

Makero smiled and gave her a grateful nod. “Good. Now is there anything you’d like to do today? All forest repairs are finally finished, and

everything's finally getting back to normal...which means we get a break."

Saderia beamed. "Actually, I was hoping I could go visit Dingo and the pack now that everything's calmed down again. It's been torture not being able to see him for a whole *month!*" Even as she spoke, she glanced at Dash out of the corner of her eye and frowned in surprise. Just as the words left her mouth, Dash turned away from her and stared at the ground, his tail flicking testily back and forth and his eyes dark with something that seemed almost like resentment. She blinked in surprise. Had she said something wrong?

The tension between them felt suddenly stronger than ever, bridging the wide gap between them. Frowning, Saderia hastily turned away from Dash and looked back at her parents, trying to pretend she didn't feel the awkwardness. A wave of anxiety swept over her when she looked up and saw the sudden blank, fearful look on her mother's face.

"I don't want you to go out there alone," Karenisha murmured, her voice oddly soft and subdued. "It's dangerous."

Saderia leaned forward and placed her paw over her mother's, her eyes bright with sympathy. "It's not nearly as dangerous as it was before, Mom. Rock is gone now, so there's not much to fear in the desert anymore."

"You could get lost," Karenisha protested, her amber eyes flashing with fear. "Just like the first time when all of this started."

Saderia firmly met her gaze. "No, Mom, I promise I won't. Dingo moved the camp closer to the forest, and I know where it is. I saw it on the way back from the battle. I know how to get there, and I won't get lost this time. Besides," she added, seeing her mother's eyes grow dimmer with pain and fear, "I don't want to go alone. I was hoping you and Dad could come with me."

Karenisha and Makero both blinked in surprise, thrown off guard.

"Oh." Karenisha blinked several times, her dark expression gone with the sudden flash of astonishment that crossed her face, as if it had been washed away with a bucket of ice cold water. "Well...I guess that would be fine."

"Cia and Jash could watch the forest while we're gone," Makero added, narrowing his eyes in thought. "So the four of us could go—me, Karenisha, Saderia, and Dash. Would that be all right?" he added, looking back and forth between Cia and Uncle Jash.

Cia merely nodded and shrugged. “That would be fine.”

“Good.” A warm smile tugged at the corners of Saderia’s mouth. “I was hoping we could bring Jeb with us, too. But...his parents might not like it...”

“I’ll go talk to them right after breakfast,” Makero assured her, waving her worries away with a flick of his tail. “I’m sure they’ll feel much more at ease about it if they know your mother and I will be going with you.”

Saderia smiled a grateful smile. “Thanks, Dad.” She paused, then looked back up at her mother, unconsciously narrowing her eyes in concern and dropping her voice to a softer, more cautious tone. “Mom...is all of this okay with you?”

Karenisha nodded with a slight smile, her amber eyes sparkling with warmth. “The desert doesn’t scare me anymore, Saderia. Not as long as I can go with you to protect you. Besides, I’d like to see how Dingo’s doing myself. I hope the stress of being a new King isn’t too much for him. I remember how unnerved I was when I first became Queen, and I was twenty then. Dingo’s only twelve! Perhaps your father and I can find some way to help him if he’s having trouble.”

Saderia blinked several times, then smiled a wide smile. That kind of speech reminded her of the old, resilient Queen Karenisha, always strong and ready to help others. Her mother really was back, both in body and in mind.

“I’m sure he’d appreciate that,” she replied, unable to hide the smile in her voice.

Karenisha nodded with a faint grin, then glanced back at her breakfast to eat.

While the others turned to their food, Saderia glanced past Dash at the archway and beamed with true happiness. As quickly as she could, she whipped back around to wolf down her breakfast, hoping that the faster she finished, the faster she could see Dingo. Her tail flicked wildly back and forth with excitement as she imagined their reunion. She could just picture walking in on Dingo leading a meeting of the pack with the kindness and compassion every Leader should have, while all the dingoes mingled and shared just like they had in the old outcast camp, with no more reason for resentment or hostility. Thunder, Dingo’s Second in Command and friend,

would be there, as well. With a bright smile, she found herself looking forward to seeing him. She giggled to herself when she realized she even looked forward to seeing Rip and Tear, Dingo's crazy and disagreeable but generally well-intentioned older brothers.

"Let's hurry!" she exclaimed, looking up from behind a mountain of food with bright amber eyes that couldn't hide her enthusiasm. "Dingo will be so happy to see us!"

While the others smiled and turned to their food, Saderia dove back into hers, wanting nothing more than to get to the desert as fast as she could. So caught up in her thoughts of Dingo, she didn't notice the dark look in Dash's eyes as he watched her gulp down her food.

With a soft, inaudible sigh, Dash turned away from Saderia and looked down at his food with a scowl, his appetite gone. As slowly as possible, he picked at the tasteless meal while avoiding Saderia's eyes. At the moment, he wanted nothing more than to delay the trip he was already starting to resent by eating as slowly as he could. It was now decided that he and Saderia wouldn't be making the journey alone together, which he wasn't sure whether he appreciated or resented. That didn't matter anyway. No matter who went on the trip, he only hoped it wouldn't last long. As far as he was concerned, Saderia was wrong. The only one Dingo would be happy to see was her.

Chapter Three

Dingo's Pack

Saderia practically skipped with excitement through the hot, endless miles of sand dunes stretching out before her under the boiling desert sun. Her two friends, Dash and Jeb, stumbled through the sand alongside her, while her parents padded along behind them, gazing out at the miles of dunes rising up around them. Already, they had been traveling the desert for a few hours, keeping an eye out for Dingo's camp. The fact that it took so many hours to get to Dingo had discouraged Saderia at first, but now that the journey seemed to be almost over, she felt rejuvenated with excitement and anticipation. Unfortunately, it seemed not all of her friends felt the same way.

When she looked at the lion walking beside her, she felt a pang of disappointment. Instead of bounding along at the same excited pace she walked in, Dash seemed to drag his paws across the desert sand, keeping his head down and letting his tail slither through the light brown dunes. It seemed he was doing everything he could to walk as slowly as possible. With a deep frown, Saderia looked away and narrowed her eyes. Maybe the heat was just dragging him down. At least, she hoped it was the heat...

Tearing her eyes off Dash, she glanced to the right and felt a hopeful smile tug at the corners of her mouth. Unlike Dash, Jeb skipped through the desert alongside her with the same enthusiasm she felt. His multicolored blue and green eyes shone with excitement. Clearly, the idea of travel and foreign places no longer terrified him the way it used to. As she walked alongside him, Saderia barely even noticed how odd he was anymore. After all the time they had spent traveling together, the tiny creature's appearance no longer fazed her, but there was no denying it was strange. His fur was a bright, vibrant yellow color with black stripes similar to hers, but his tail ended in a fluffy orange tuft just like Dash's. The strangest part of him was his webbed, amphibian-like feet. Jeb had come from an odd forest dubbed 'the strange forest' for apt reasons. The unnatural forest had a weird history

that had given all of its inhabitants—kraguers—strange appearances and mutations. It had startled her, at first, but at this point, she was used to her friend's odd appearance.

"I hope Dingo's doing well," Jeb chirped with a smile, oblivious to the tension between Saderia and Dash. "My mom and dad and I kind of miss him, but it's pretty cool that he's like the Emperor of the desert now."

"Leader," Saderia corrected. She let out a soft sigh. "I miss him, too, but I'm sure he's doing well." She paused, then looked up at Dash and narrowed her eyes cautiously, trying to squeeze up a smile. "Right, Dash?"

Dash looked up at her out of the corner of his eye and nodded with a tight smile, then just turned back to face the ground and trudged on without a word. He didn't bother to cast her another glance.

Saderia's hopes fell and the smile slipped from her face, but she tried not to let it show. Ducking her head and biting back a sigh, she glanced back at Karenisha and Makero to try to distract herself from the tension between her and Dash. With a frown, she braced herself, expecting her mother to seem scared and uneasy in the place where she had been kidnapped. To her surprise, though, the Queen's amber eyes shone with a bright, eager light as she walked alongside Makero. A smile warmed her face as she gazed around at the desert, radiating an air of tranquility and even intrigue. When she caught Saderia looking at her, she smiled brightly, looking just like the happy, curious Queen she used to be.

Saderia smiled back, then looked ahead with shining amber eyes. Her heart leapt with excitement when she stumbled over the top of a tall sand dune and caught sight of two lanky canine silhouettes peeking up from behind the next dune, dark against the piercing glow of the sun. A hopeful smile lit up her face. "Dingo?"

With an eager call, she darted away from her friends and raced toward the two canines on the other side of the dune, ignoring her friends' cries of surprise. As fast as she could, she darted through the sand and dove over the top of the next dune just as the two figures disappeared. Letting out a gasp of surprise, she skidded to a halt just as she staggered over the top of the dune and looked around with wide eyes. Her heart skipped with shock when she realized there was no one behind the dune. Blinking in confusion, she looked around with wide, bewildered eyes and tipped her head to the side. "Dingo?"

“Nope!” Saderia jumped with a shrill cry at the sound of the bright shout. In a flash, a shaggy red figure leapt out from behind a dune to her right, his yellow eyes gleaming with amusement. With a gasp, Saderia whipped around to face him in shock, then whirled back around when another figure leapt out from behind a dune to her left in a streak of short orange fur. “We’re just his insane brothers!”

Saderia’s fur bristled with alarm and her heart skipped a beat. Blinking several times, she glanced back and forth between the two dingoes on either side of her, then rolled her eyes when she realized she recognized them. Forcing her heart to slow down to normal, she turned to her right and raised an eyebrow when she saw nothing but a shaggy red muzzle just inches away from her face, grinning wider than any dingo she had ever known. Hiding a giggle, she pushed the muzzle away with a paw and let out a good-natured groan. “Oh, great! It’s you two!” The words sent the red dingo stumbling back in a fit of hysterical laughter, while the orange one on her left simply rolled his eyes.

Saderia grinned and shook her head, then looked back when Dash’s stunned, panicked voice split the air. “Saderia! Are you okay?” In the same instant, Karenisha, Makero, Dash, and Jeb leapt up to the top of the sand dune behind her, their faces tense and their fur bristling with worry.

Rolling her eyes, Saderia glanced back over her shoulder and gave them a reassuring smile. “It’s okay, guys! It’s just Rip and Tear playing their stupid tricks!”

“Hey!” Rip exclaimed through his laughter, his bright yellow eyes glinting in the sunlight and his long blood red fur bristling with excitement. “It was Tear’s idea! He’s stupid!”

Tear glared at Rip, his short orange tail lashing with annoyance. “*You’re* stupid! It was *your* idea!”

Rip just snickered and shot him an indignant sneer. “Was not!”

“Was too!”

“Guys!” Saderia shot them the sternest glare she could manage, though she couldn’t stop a grin from twitching at the corners of her mouth. She hadn’t seen these two jesters in a month, and as disturbing as it might have seemed to her before, they did have a tendency to grow on her.

“Girl! Forest food!” Rip shot back, giving her a wide grin and pointing at her with a shaggy paw.

“Idiot!” Tear chimed in, pointing a paw at Rip and merely grinning when he glared back at him.

Saderia just shook her head at the two dingoes.

With a wide, toothy grin, Rip snickered and turned back to face her, his eyes gleaming with amusement. “Long time no see, tiger. What brings you to the desert?”

Saderia couldn’t help but smile back. “We’re here to see Dingo.”

“We, huh?” Raising an eyebrow, Rip glanced up at the sand dune behind her and waved at the rest of her travel party. “Hey, lion and freaky thing! Haven’t seen you guys in a while either!”

Dash managed to roll his eyes in a somewhat good-natured way and held up a paw in greeting. “Hi, Rip.”

Beside him, Jeb waved cautiously, not seeming to mind the mild insult.

While Dash gestured for his foster parents and Jeb to follow him and started to lead the way down the sand dune to meet Saderia, Rip, and Tear, Rip waved amicably at Karenisha and Makero. “Hey, forest Queen and King. What’s up? Here to check in on the greatest Leader in history?”

Dash had to look up for that. “The greatest Leader in *history*?”

Rip snickered while Tear just rolled his eyes. “Yeah, that’s what everybody calls our little brother now,” Rip chuckled. “Someone said it and apparently it caught on. That’s okay, though, because Tear and I have a ball razzing him for it!”

Saderia gave him a mock disapproving glance. “Now, Rip, you haven’t been too mean to him, have you?”

Rip just grinned and snickered. “If shouting, ‘Look out! Rock’s returned from the dead!’ every morning to wake him up doesn’t count, then I’ve been a perfect brother.”

Saderia just rolled her eyes, though she couldn’t help but feel a chill run through her at the thought of the old dingo Leader. After all the horrible nightmares she had been having the past month, even the mention of Rock sent a shiver down her spine. She winced. She hoped Dingo didn’t have nightmares like she did. Taking a quiet breath, she made herself shake off her tense thoughts and simply looked back up at Rip, keeping her tone impartial. “So is Dingo at camp now with the pack?”

“Yeah.” Rip just shrugged and flicked his tail. “Want us to take you there?”

Saderia smiled a hopeful smile. “That’d be great!”

“In that case, let’s get going.” With a wide grin, Rip jumped to his paws and eagerly pricked his ears. “I’m sure he’ll be excited to see you again!” Without giving them time to react, he flicked his shaggy red tail once, then turned to bound away in a quick flash of red.

While Rip shot across the sand dunes without looking back, Tear just rolled his eyes and slowly pushed himself to his paws. Seeing Saderia’s stunned look, he just sighed and shook his head in exasperation. “Come on. I’ll take you to the camp while that maniac bounces all over the desert.”

Saderia hid a grin. “Thanks, Tear.” Looking back over her shoulder, she flicked her tail at her friends and family just as they stepped up to her to signal for them to follow. When Tear turned to lead the way, Saderia instantly bounded after him, while Dash, Jeb, Karenisha, and Makero fell into step behind them.

Side by side, the six of them took off running through the rolling sand dunes, blinking against the blazing desert sun and heading in the direction Tear’s older brother had charged off in. Eventually, they caught up with Rip when they bounded over the top of a tall dune. After grumbling under his breath about slow forest food, he reluctantly slowed down enough to lead the way. Rolling her eyes and hiding a grin, Saderia padded along between Rip and Tear while they both led the way, trying not to laugh at the jibes they tossed at each other along the way. Behind her, Dash, Jeb, and her parents followed them through the sea of sand dunes, smiling despite the boiling sunlight beating down on them. Saderia couldn’t help but grin as she followed Rip and Tear through the desert, feeling an undeniable surge of relief. From their playful jibes and shining eyes, she could tell they were doing well. And if they were doing fine, Dingo probably was, too. Her heart lifted and she practically skipped through the sand, eager to see her friend again. She couldn’t wait to reach the camp.

After a few more minutes of walking, Saderia followed Rip and Tear to the top of a tall dune and froze, letting out a wild cry of delight. Before her, the land sloped down into a valley surrounded by sand dunes. Rocky dens with wide, gaping holes carved into the fronts of them peeked out from beneath the enormous hills of sand rising up all over the valley. In the

center of the camp was a large, hollowed-out stone trough filled with sandy water. At the very back of the camp were two larger dens peeking out of huge dunes, seeming to stand watch over all the others—the Leader's den and the Second in Command's den where Dingo and Thunder lived. All around camp, dingoes slunk out of their sand dune dens and stretched their legs, blinking against the piercing yellow sun shining over the gritty camp. Canines sat gathered all around the water trough and scattered around the rest of the camp, talking, laughing, and telling stories. Bright, eager conversation filled the dry desert air.

Rip glanced at her with shining yellow eyes and grinned. “Like our new home, tiger?”

She nodded eagerly, unable to hide a smile. “It’s great!”

Rip chuckled and happily flicked his tail. “Glad you like it.” He paused, then glanced at his younger brother and gave him a dismissive flick of his paw. “Tear, you go...do something to occupy yourself. I’ll go get Dingo!”

Tear just rolled his eyes. Giving Rip a half-hearted swat, he turned to pad lazily into the camp, giving Saderia and her friends a quick nod of farewell. “Nice seeing you guys again!”

Rip instantly darted past Tear in a wild streak of red, flicking his tail toward Saderia and her friends and shouting his last words over his shoulder as he tore into camp. “Come on,” he called. “You can hang out in camp while I find Dingo. Don’t worry—none of us are going to eat you!”

“Didn’t he just call us food a few seconds ago?” Dash chuckled, stepping up to stand beside Saderia and twitching his whiskers with a mild hint of amusement.

Saderia just smiled and rolled her eyes. “You know how dingoes are. Now come on, let’s go see how everyone’s doing.”

Dash just nodded. Without another word, he looked down and followed her into camp, while Jeb trotted along behind them, hiding a hint of hesitation. Karenisha and Makero followed close behind them, but when Saderia looked back, her parents didn’t seem as afraid and worried as she had thought they would be. Rip and Tear’s playful nature must have put them at ease and assured them that there was no danger.

Shaking off her thoughts, Saderia turned around just as she reached the bottom of the sand dune and stepped out into the camp. To her surprise,

the instant she set foot in the camp, many of the dingoes sitting around the water trough and the dens looked up from what they were doing and gave them friendly waves and smiles. Several of them stepped aside to let them move deeper into camp. A few of them called out eager greetings to her, Dash, and Jeb, while others politely addressed Makero as ‘the forest King’ and asked how the forest Queen was doing. A warm, bright smile lit up Saderia’s face as she returned the friendly greetings. Her heart glowed with delight. It seemed the old outcasts hadn’t changed a bit since she had last seen them. None of their old cruel attitudes seemed to have returned. For once, they seemed both friendly and lucky.

Smiling to herself, Saderia scanned the crowd of canines around her, looking for familiar faces. Standing by the water trough was Brawny, the burly dark brown dog who had acted as Thunder’s Second in Command when Thunder had ruled as Leader of the outcasts. Relief stirred in Saderia’s chest when she studied his expression and saw only happiness and contentment. He seemed to hold no resentment over the fact that his position had been taken when Dingo had taken over as Leader. Apart from him, Saderia didn’t immediately recognize any of the dingoes around her. At least, not by name.

When they reached the center of camp, Dash and Jeb walked off to show Karenisha and Makero around, leaving Saderia alone. As she padded onward, she found herself searching for Thunder’s close friend, Lightning, as well as Lightning’s little sister, Bunny, who had formed a very strong bond with Tawny, a cub from Saderia’s forest. Mostly, Saderia wanted to see the two familiar dingoes to make sure both of them were doing all right after the war, but she also found herself wondering about Bunny. Sometimes the cheeky little pup acted a bit...strange. Enough to make her wonder about her. Lost in thought, she drifted through the crowds of dingoes gathered around the camp’s center, searching for the two familiar faces. Just when she began to wonder if they weren’t there, a soft, familiar voice to her left made her jump.

“Princess Saderia?”

With a quiet gasp, she whirled around to face the source of the voice, then relaxed and smiled when she realized who had said it. “Hi, Lightning,” she called, waving a paw in greeting and hearing the smile in her voice.

The sleek yellow dingo she had been looking for stood just a few paces away from her beside the water trough, his yellow eyes shimmering in the sunlight. When Saderia turned around and stepped closer to him, Lightning smiled and waved, giving her an apologetic look. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you.”

Saderia shrugged it off with a flick of her tail. “It’s nothing. I’m just a bit jumpy after the war, that’s all.”

Lightning winced sympathetically. “I know what you mean. I always catch myself looking over both shoulders whenever I leave camp. Bunny’s still nervous, too.”

“Hey! I am not!”

At the sound of the high, sharp voice, Saderia looked down just in time to see Bunny leap out from behind the water trough by Lightning’s paws, her pitch black fur bristling and her amber eyes flashing with indignation. A cool scowl covered her tiny face.

Saderia managed a faint smile and waved at the tiny black pup. “Hello, Bunny. Are you jumpy, too?”

“It’s a lie!” Bunny glared up at Lightning with narrowed amber eyes and lashed her tail in irritation. “*He*’s the jumpy one.”

“Temper, temper.” With a roll of his eyes, Lightning smiled and patted her with his paw. When Bunny just narrowed her eyes and swatted at him, he let out a good-natured sigh. “Okay, sorry. Do you want me to help you up so you can get a drink of water?”

“I don’t need anyone’s help,” Bunny snapped. Giving him an indignant glare, she leapt up and grabbed the side of the rocky water trough. In a flash, she pulled herself up onto the narrow edge of the hollowed stone and leaned forward to take a few sips of water, then easily leapt back down to the sand. She gave her older brother a challenging glare. “See? Easy.”

Lightning just smiled. “All right, Bunny. Anything else you’d like?”

“Actually, yes.” Narrowing her eyes in a cool, guarded expression, she settled back onto the sand and curled her short black tail over her paws, giving Saderia a frosty but inquisitive look. “Forest Princess, have you seen Tawny lately?”

Saderia blinked at her in surprise, then just shook her head. “No, I haven’t. But I’ll probably see Loki again soon, and as soon as I do, I’ll tell her to let Tawny know you asked about her.”

“Good. Do that.” Bunny hesitated, then looked down with narrowed eyes and lashed her tail, unable to hide a twinge of sadness in her voice. “I miss her. It’s been a month since I’ve seen her.” She glared at her older brother out of the corner of her eye. “You promised we would see each other again!”

Lightning held up a paw. “Calm down, Bunny. It’s not that easy. It still takes hours to get from the forest to the desert.” Seeing her glare intensify, he hastily flicked his tail and offered her a weak smile. “But I’ll see what I can do.” He paused, then turned to Saderia, his yellow eyes pleading. “Is there any way you could get Loki or Maeta or someone to bring Tawny here sometime soon?”

Saderia cast Bunny a quick glance, then simply shrugged. “I’ll have to ask Loki about it. I’m probably going to see her tomorrow, so I’ll ask her then.”

“She’d better say yes.” Bunny sharply flicked her tail and flattened her ears, giving Lightning a long, cold glance. When her brother merely shrugged helplessly, Bunny cut her eyes at Saderia and watched her for a tense heartbeat of silence, then simply dipped her head to her. “Bye, Princess Saderia. Give my regards to Tawny.” With one last flick of her tail, she turned and walked away, never bothering to look back at them.

Saderia raised an eyebrow. “I see she’s as charming as ever.”

Lightning just rolled his eyes with a warm chuckle. “I don’t know why she’s so cranky all the time. Don’t take it personally. She glares at everyone.”

Saderia managed a faint smile. “Don’t worry. I don’t mind.” By that point, she was quite used to Bunny’s odd disposition, though the pup did sometimes seem strange to her. Not that pups weren’t bad-tempered at times, but Bunny took it to a whole new level. It wasn’t just her grumpiness that bewildered Saderia either. There was something somehow...off about Bunny. She always seemed to talk in a strange way that made her seem much older and wiser than she was even though her words were still tinged with a general, underlying nature of immaturity. Maybe it was just a dingo thing.

Shaking off her thoughts, she turned to gaze absently out at the camp. “Is Dingo even here right now?” she murmured, wondering where Rip had gone and what was keeping him.

Just as the words left her mouth, a bright, familiar voice suddenly sliced through the air, cutting off Lightning before he could reply. “Sorry, tiger! I had to wake him up first!”

Blinking in surprise, Saderia whirled around to face the source of the voice and froze, her eyes widening with excitement and her face lighting up with a brilliant smile. Just a few paces away from her, Rip trotted through the crowd of dingoes, a sloppy grin on his face and a playful gleam in his yellow irises. Catching her eye, he chuckled and bounded closer to her, then dipped his head and stepped off to the side with a fake bow and a loud, mocking call. “May I present to you...His Majesty!”

A second later, a shaggy brown canine stepped out from behind the crowd after Rip, a wide grin on his face and a brilliant glow in his shimmering light brown eyes.

Saderia’s heart leapt with excitement. “Dingo!” In a flash of orange fur, she leapt toward him just as he stepped closer to her, letting out a shrill, eager cry. Before he could react, she crashed into him in a wild streak of movement that nearly knocked him off his paws.

Dingo let out a yelp of surprise and stumbled back a pace before catching himself. When she closed her eyes and buried her muzzle in his sandy brown chest, he blinked in surprise, then smiled and patted her carefully on the back. With a soft, relieved sigh, Saderia nuzzled him for a long moment, then pulled back to look at him with shining amber eyes. Her heart thumped with hope as she gazed up at her friend, making her whole body feel light with relief. Just as she had hoped, he looked well—the best he had ever looked since the day she had met him. His long, shaggy brown fur was clean and shining with health, and his light brown eyes glowed in the sunlight. Most of the wounds he had received in battle had healed and become nothing but mere scars that blended in with the rest of the scars he already had. Both of his ears were still chipped, but due to care, they seemed a bit less ragged and tattered. With a jolt of surprise, she realized she couldn’t even see his ribs anymore. Since the day she had met him, Dingo had never been fully nourished except for the few times he had resided in the forest with her. The pack must be doing well for him to look so healthy.

Feeling her heart beat faster with joy, she gazed up at Dingo and smiled. “Hi, Dingo! It’s great to see you!”

Dingo smiled a warm smile and eagerly flicked his tail. “Long time no see, Saderia. Forest repairs must have taken a long time, huh?”

Saderia nodded with a smile and a roll of her eyes. “You have no idea! I thought it would only take a week or two, but things were worse than they seemed, I guess. I wanted to come visit you earlier, but I just couldn’t find the time, and I was still worried about my mom. I wanted to make sure she was okay before I tried to leave again.”

Dingo gave her a sympathetic smile. “It’s fine. How is your mom, by the way?”

Saderia beamed. “She’s doing great! She’s actually here—she and Dad wanted to check in on you to see how things were going. I can’t see her right now, but she’s here somewhere.” She hesitated, then narrowed her eyes, feeling a twinge of worry stir in her chest. “Things are going well here, aren’t they?”

Dingo smiled and nodded eagerly. “It’s going better than I thought it would. It’s kind of weird waking up in the Leader’s den every morning and being with the dingoes again—especially now that they don’t hate me—but overall, it’s great.”

Saderia studied him curiously, her eyes bright with wonder. “So the dingoes are nice to you now? They’re not giving you any problems?”

Dingo shook his head. “Nope, none of them. Well, none other than Rip, but he’s just an idiot.” He rolled his eyes and chuckled while Saderia smiled.

“So you’re getting used to being Leader?” she pressed, her tail twitching with excitement. “I mean, after the battle, the dingoes more or less talked you into it, so I was kind of worried about how you would cope with it afterward. I knew you would be a great Leader, but still. After the war, you must have had to do a lot to calm the dingoes down.”

Dingo shrugged. “It wasn’t nearly as bad as I thought it would be. I basically just led them to our new camp and assigned them all to their new dens. It was a little hard to get used to, especially since I was just kind of thrown into this without being Second in Command first, but I’ve gotten into the habit of keeping everyone under control. I more or less just let the dingoes come and go as they please and do as they wish now that everything’s calmed down, but I do make sure they come back before dark and I always keep a few guards posted outside the camp.”

Saderia blinked in surprise, her amber eyes darkening with worry. “Why do you need guards?”

Dingo shifted uncomfortably and looked away with a dark frown. “Well, Rock is gone, and he was the real menace, but like it or not, he still had a lot of followers. They didn’t all just vaporize after Rock died, and now a lot of them are kind of...well, they don’t really like me, to say the least.”

Saderia winced. She hadn’t actually thought about what would happen to Rock’s old followers now that Rock himself was gone, but now she realized they could pose a very real threat to Dingo’s new pack. A worried frown crossed her face. “They’re not doing anything too bad, are they?”

To her relief, Dingo shook his head and shrugged. “No, they’ve only attacked the camp once, and we managed to fight them off with no casualties and minimal injuries. They’re more of a nuisance than a threat actually. Instead of all banding together to attack us—you know, the smart thing to do—they mainly just stick together in little groups of ten or so and attack my dingoes when they leave camp to go hunting. They don’t have a new Leader or anything like that, and dingoes can’t really function properly or act as a proper threat without a Leader—it’s just their nature. So, all in all, I’m not too concerned about them, but I don’t want them to hurt anyone in my pack—or kill anyone, if they get strong enough—so that’s why I post guards.”

“And the night thing?”

“They attack mostly at night, so that’s why I like to have everyone back before it gets dark.” Dingo paused, then managed a bright, hopeful smile. “Not all of Rock’s old followers are bad, though.”

Saderia looked up in surprise. “They aren’t?”

Dingo shook his head. “Nope. Remember how Thunder said he only stayed in the pack because he was scared? As it turns out, a lot of Rock’s followers felt the same way. About two weeks after I took the pack to their new camp, some of Rock’s old followers came to me and asked if they could become members of the pack.”

Saderia’s eyes widened in surprise. “Really? How many?”

Dingo shrugged. “I don’t know for sure. A good many of them joined, and over the past two weeks, more have been coming.” He paused,

then smiled a faint smile and flicked his tail, his voice growing softer and happier. "My mother, Sand, was one of the dingoes who came to join the pack."

Saderia blinked in surprise, then gave him a warm smile in return, feeling her heart lift with happiness at the sight of the misty look on his face. "Really? So you're finally getting to know her?"

Dingo let out a soft sigh and shrugged with a weak smile. "Kind of. We talk sometimes, and she likes it here. She told me she was sorry for the way she treated me, but we're just kind of acquaintances. We still don't know each other all that well or talk that often. Still, it's better than the relationship we had before, and I'm glad she's here. But anyway, apart from the ones that joined my pack, there are a few other dingoes that used to belong to Rock's pack that don't pose a threat. Some of Rock's old pack members just roam around the desert and don't bother us. They just keep to themselves, and since they don't really bother us, we don't really bother them. The pack considers them and Rock's other, more...violent followers outcasts now, but I didn't keep the old pack rules of starving and hunting outcasts, as you've probably guessed. So basically...some of them have joined my pack, a few have broken away from Rock's other followers without joining my pack and just walk the desert alone, while the majority of Rock's old followers are out for my blood. But that's okay," he added with a roll of his eyes. "At this point, I've just about gotten used to dingoes trying to kill me."

Saderia managed a slight grin and a roll of her eyes, but her heart beat faster with concern. Unable to hide her unease, she felt her smile fade into a darker, more worried frown. "You said they're not that much of a threat, though, right? I mean, I don't want you or any of the other pack members to get hurt..."

He let out a soft sigh and managed a weak smile. "Don't worry, Saderia. We'll be fine."

"I hope so." Saderia paused, then gazed up at him with shimmering amber eyes and let out a long breath, unable to hide the relief on her face. Outcasts or not, he and the others seemed happy and safe at the moment, and that was the best thing she could have hoped for. Unable to fight back a smile, she shook her head and sighed. "I'm so glad to see you again.

Outcasts or no outcasts, it's good to see you're safe now, and it's great to finally get to see you again..."

"Ahem..."

At the sound of the curt voice, Saderia blinked in surprise and whipped around to see who had spoken. Her eyes widened when she saw Dash standing just a few feet away from them outside a crowd of dingoes. His dark, narrowed amber eyes were locked on her and Dingo, never blinking or looking away. A deep scowl crossed his face, seeming oddly dark against the bright glow of the sun. When his eyes caught Saderia's, he hardly reacted and didn't say another word, keeping his gaze locked on her and Dingo.

"Dash?" Saderia blinked in surprise and tipped her head to the side, feeling a jolt of shock race through her at the sight of his odd expression. "Where...Where have you been?" She paused, then flicked her tail toward Dingo with a half-hearted smile. "I found Dingo!"

"I see that," Dash replied, his voice icy and tense. With a strained smile that looked more like a scowl, he made himself wave half-heartedly at Dingo, then paused. For a tense beat of silence, he glanced back and forth between Saderia and Dingo, then frowned and narrowed his eyes in a challenging glare. "But I'm sure he must be really busy. I mean, he is the new Leader of the pack and everything. He must have a lot of things he has to take care of."

To his dismay, Saderia shook her head with an encouraging smile. "No, it's fine. Dingo says he's got everything under control."

Of course he did.

Saderia hesitated with a bewildered, wondering frown, then squeezed up a hopeful smile and waved him over. "Come on, Dash, it's been a month since we've seen him. Come over here and say hi."

Dash let out a long sigh and made himself stand up to walk over to them, trying to erase the scowl on his face and hide his annoyance. He didn't want to be mad at Dingo, but he also didn't want to be around him. All he wanted was for Saderia to trust him again and for the problems Dastarius had caused to go away. A twinge of sadness stirred in his chest, making his icy expression waver. Giving Dingo a long look out of the corner of his eye, he winced and glanced down at his paws as he stepped up to him, avoiding his eyes. It wasn't right to act so cruel to him. After all,

technically he hadn't done anything. Biting back a sigh, Dash made himself look back up at Dingo when he stopped in front of him and squeezed up the most convincing smile he could manage. "Hi, Dingo. It's, uh, good to see you."

Dingo snorted and raised an eyebrow in disbelief. "Yeah, right! You've probably been partying without me!"

Dash froze in alarm. His fur started to bristle with uncertainty until he realized he was only teasing. Forcing his fur to lie flat, he tried to smile. "How'd you guess?" he responded, nearly wincing at the sound of his voice. He had wanted to sound light and mocking, but his tone seemed forced. Silently cursing himself, he glanced at Saderia to make sure he hadn't said the wrong thing. To his relief, she just smiled and shook her head. Still...even as she smiled, she cast him a long, lingering glance out of the corner of her eye. Was it because she was upset with him?

Dingo just rolled his eyes, oblivious to the tension between them. "Lucky guess." He paused, then flicked his tail at Saderia and smiled. "Anyway, I've just been telling Saderia about what's been going on around the pack. Is everything going well in your forest?"

Dash managed a curt nod. "It's great."

"Good." Dingo paused, then glanced over their heads with a curious frown, his eyes flicking to something behind them. "Hey, is that Jeb? I didn't know you guys brought him."

"Oh, yeah." Saderia turned around with a grin and raised her voice to a shout. "Hey, Jeb! Come over here!"

From where he stood a few paces away by a crowd of dingoes, Jeb looked up in surprise, then smiled. With glittering blue/green eyes, he hastily bounded across the camp and skidded to a halt between Saderia and Dash in front of Dingo, his face glowing with excitement. "Hi, guys! Hi, Dingo! What's going on?"

Dingo shrugged and smiled back. "Nothing much. What about you, Jeb? Are you and your family doing okay?"

Jeb gave him an eager nod. "Yeah, we're fine. My mom and dad are still kind of scared after the whole war thing, and they usually don't let me out of their sight, but other than that, things are fine."

While he spoke and Dingo nodded along with a smile, Saderia studied Jeb's expression curiously, searching for any sign of fear or distress.

To her surprise, her timid friend seemed much calmer than she expected him to in a strange place like the desert—a place he used to fear. Surrounded by his friends, he showed no signs of unease at all. Absently, Saderia wondered if he had nightmares like she did. After all, Jeb was typically known as the more cowardly one in their group of friends. If he did have them, they certainly didn't seem to be bothering him much in the waking world, unlike her nightmares, which still haunted the back of her mind even in the daylight.

Shaking off her troubled thoughts, Saderia started to say something, then froze when a kind, familiar voice called out a greeting. “Dingo! It’s good to see you!”

At the sound of the friendly voice, Saderia turned around with Dash, Dingo, and Jeb to see who had spoken and smiled. Just a few steps away from them on the other side of the water trough, Karenisha and Makero trotted toward them, their amber and green eyes shining in the desert light. Catching the eyes of Saderia and her friends, the King and Queen smiled and stopped to sit back when they reached them, their expressions friendly and polite.

“Greetings, Leader Dingo.” Makero nodded to the shaggy canine with a respectful smile. “How are things in the desert?”

“Hello, King Makero and Queen Karenisha,” Dingo responded, dipping his head with the same air of formality. “Things are well here. How are things in the forest?”

“Well,” Makero replied. “Repairs are finally finished, and the forest is at peace. Karenisha and I decided to come here to keep an eye on Saderia and also to see how you were settling into your role as the pack’s new Leader.” He paused, then flicked his tail and gave him a warmer, more casual smile. “Speaking of which, if you ever need any help, you can always ask us.”

Dingo quickly shook his head and held up a paw. “I appreciate it, but I’m doing quite well on my own,” he replied. Typical dingo pride—Saderia had expected no less. With a firm look, Dingo hesitated, then managed a weak smile. “Although, I am glad you came here, if for nothing else than to look after Saderia. I don’t want to alarm you and the Queen, but Rock’s old followers are becoming a bit of a problem. I don’t think you have to worry too much since they rarely come near camp, but just be sure

that when you go home, you either leave before nighttime or spend the night here and leave in the morning—they tend to strike the most at night.”

Makero nodded darkly, his eyes narrowing with seriousness. “Right. Thanks, Dingo. We’ll probably leave before nighttime.” When he saw Saderia’s downcast frown, he gave her a gentle smile and a soft flick of his tail. “Don’t worry, Saderia. I’m sure you’ll be able to come back soon to visit.”

Saderia let out a weary sigh and looked away. “It’s not the same.”

“It’s okay, Saderia.” Dingo gave her a weak smile and flicked her lightly with his tail. “Your father’s right. We’ll be able to see each other soon.” He paused, then turned back to the King with a thoughtful frown. “Could you come back here next week, same time? I think it would be much safer if we planned ahead of time—that way, I could meet you at the edge of the forest or have other dingoes meet you to escort you to camp. That way, you’d have extra protection just in case some of Rock’s old followers *did* attack.”

Karenisha frowned, a tense glimmer of fear and worry in her narrowed amber eyes. “It’s not *that* likely, is it?”

Dingo shook his head, his voice calm and sincere. “No, not really, Queen Karenisha. I just want to make sure you’re safe.”

Karenisha frowned and studied him closely, then let out a soft sigh and managed a grateful smile when she read the honesty in his voice. “Thank you. I think that would be fine.” She paused and cast a glance over her shoulder at the camp behind her, then looked back at Saderia and her friends and flicked her tail with a smile. “Anyway, if you don’t mind, I think Makero and I will go around to talk to some of the other dingoes so you guys can catch up.”

Saderia smiled. “Thanks, Mom. Thanks, Dad. I’ll come get you when we’re ready to leave.”

Karenisha and Makero just nodded and smiled, then turned around to walk away. As soon as they padded off into camp and disappeared into the crowds of dingoes, out of eyeshot and earshot, Dingo turned back around to Saderia with an inquisitive frown. “Speaking of...catching up, Saderia...have you had any Dreams? Or have you...talked to Claw recently?”

A pang of regret shot through Saderia at his words. For the first time, she realized that it wasn't just Dingo who she hadn't seen in a while, but his sister, Claw, as well. There wasn't much she could do about that, though. Claw was...well, dead. Killed by her older brother Bone a year ago, she was a kindly spirit who visited Saderia in Dreams, but only when it was needed. Saderia could always ask her to come visit her before she went to sleep, but it was entirely up to the ghost whether she came or not. Saderia had already figured out that Claw would probably only visit her in times of crisis. After all, she was dead, and it wouldn't exactly be natural for her to just pop in and say hi out of the blue. Despite that fact, she missed her spirit guide. Still, at least her absence meant that there was nothing seriously wrong with the world—nothing that involved her anyway.

Pushing away her wistful thoughts, Saderia looked up at Dingo and shook her head with a regretful sigh. "Sorry, I haven't seen her. She visited me once right after the battle to tell me that things had gone according to plan and that she was happy that everyone was safe, but I haven't seen her since then. I don't think she visits me unless there's a problem."

"Oh." Dingo let out a weary sigh and glanced down at his paws with a sad, wistful frown. He paused, then took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Meeting Saderia's gaze, he managed a weak, hopeful smile and simply flicked his tail. "Well, at least there's nothing wrong. If you do see Claw sometime, tell her I said hi and that I miss her."

Saderia gave him a sympathetic smile. "Don't worry. I will."

Dingo managed to smile back, a grateful gleam in his eyes. "Thanks."

"No problem." Saderia paused, then grinned and raised an eyebrow at Dingo, shaking off her wistful thoughts in a rush of curiosity. "So...don't keep us in suspense, Dingo! What's it like to be Leader of the pack?"

Dingo chuckled and rolled his eyes, looking more like his playful self. "It's nothing special. I usually just hang out with the other dingoes or bother Rip and Tear or something. I usually give the dingoes a few things to do in the morning—assigning them to hunting parties and whatnot—but other than that, I just let them do as they please while I do the same. I do have to take charge when some of Rock's old followers attack, but thankfully, those instances are rare." He paused, then gave her a wide grin. "I get a cool den, though!"

Saderia raised an eyebrow. “Really?”

“Yep!” Dingo nodded with an enthusiastic grin and gestured to the largest den at the back of the camp with a flick of his tail. “That one over there. It’s a lot bigger than the other dens. But then again, when you grow up with four siblings in a den barely big enough to give each dingo enough room to breathe, *anything* is considered big.”

Saderia laughed and shook her head with a wide smile. “You’ve got a point there. So it’s nice, huh? Is that where you keep Claw’s ribbon and journal?”

Dingo nodded with a more sober smile. “Yeah, I keep them in a corner in there. Rip and Tear actually asked to see the journal once, but they couldn’t read it. Rip evidently wants me to teach him how to read now, but he can’t sit still for five minutes and learning something would probably kill him.”

Saderia grinned and bit back a laugh. “What about Thunder? He lives in the den next to yours, right? I haven’t seen him around here. He’s doing well, isn’t he?”

Dingo shrugged and lightly flicked his tail. “Yeah. He’s out hunting with some others right now. He’s doing well, though. He seems to like being Second in Command much better than he liked being Leader, but that’s just him, I guess.”

Saderia smiled a warm, happy smile. It was good to hear that Thunder was having an easier time being Second in Command. During the war, it had been clear that he had found it difficult to deal with the pressure of being Leader. Now that Dingo had taken on the burden of that job, he probably felt more at ease.

With a bright, glowing smile, Saderia settled back on the warm sand to ask Dingo more questions about the pack, the other dingoes, and his Leadership. Already, she could tell that he was doing great in his new pack and had shaped up to be a wonderful Leader—a thought that made her heart glow with relief. More than that, though, it felt great to have someone to talk to in such a light-hearted way now that she and Dash didn’t talk much anymore. For once, she actually felt like she was talking to a friend.

As she and Jeb talked to Dingo and laughed along with him, she noticed Dash hardly said a word. Instead of joining in with them, he just sat off by himself a few steps away, watching them without a sound. Saderia’s

heart felt heavy at the sight. Part of her felt bad for him, but she didn't think there was anything she could do. If she tried to talk to him and include him in the conversation, things just turned awkward. The tension between them was bad enough even when she left him alone. She was surprised Dingo hadn't noticed it yet...although he probably had and had just decided not to say anything out of kindness. Perhaps she should do the same and just leave it alone.

The day seemed to pass by much too quickly as she spoke with Jeb and Dingo while Dash kept to himself. Before she knew it, the sun had already begun to sink closer to the horizon, casting dying rays of light out over the desert sand. A weary sigh rose in Saderia's throat and her heart grew heavy with regret. As much as she wished it weren't true, she knew she would have to leave soon to make it back before dark. Still, it didn't stop her from wishing the sun would stay frozen in the sky, giving them a few more hours together. She would have given anything to spend just a little more time with Dingo before he led her and the others back to the forest. It wasn't just the fact that she would miss him, though. As the sun sank closer to the horizon, Saderia realized there was another reason why she didn't want to leave.

Once she returned to the forest, Dingo would be gone and Jeb would be at home most of the time, which meant there would be no one for her to talk to—at least, not in the warm, light-hearted way she had today. When she was alone at home, there would be no one to ease the tension and stress she felt whenever she and Dash were together.

There would be no one she could safely call a friend.

Chapter Four

Flashbacks

An evil cackling filled the air. Saderia's paws scrabbled wildly on the jagged edge of Rock's monstrous den, helplessly trying to hold on. Her amber eyes grew wide with terror as she struggled to save herself. "It's too late, Princess!" An evil voice snickered in the background, sending shivers down her spine. "Throw her to her death! Then the forest is ours forever!"

A shrill scream of terror tore out of Saderia's throat the instant the words rang through the thick, blood-scented air. The ledge crumbled right beneath her paws, sending her spiraling to her death. With a deafening cry, she squeezed her eyes shut as wind raced past her fur and her paws flailed helplessly through nothing but air. An image of a huge, bloody lake flashed before her eyes. Just as the sea of blood flickered through her mind, a deafening crack and a thud rang in Saderia's ears. With a gasp, she forced her eyes open and looked out into nothing but a world of darkness.

Lying paralyzed on her side, she stared into the dark void around her, feeling nothing but cold. Her mother's eyes glowed through the shadows, as dull and empty as the darkness and filled with terror. Their dark amber depths were dim and lifeless, empty of any hope. Slowly, her mother stepped closer to her, but her eyes only grew dimmer and dimmer with each step. Her soft, chilling voice hissed through the darkness. "Ghost," she whispered, her eyes boring into Saderia. "Ghost. Ghost! Ghost!" The chant grew louder and louder until Saderia squeezed her eyes shut to block it out. Maniacal laughter boomed out just above her, sending chills through her.

"Long live the true King!"

Saderia's eyes flew open when quiet paw steps suddenly whispered through the shadows, loud over her mother's muttering and the evil cackling that seemed to echo all around her. Slowly, she lifted her head to look up just as the paw steps stopped right in front of her. Dark amber eyes met her own. Slowly, she reached out a broken paw.

"Why won't you save me?" she whispered.

Dash's cold amber eyes bored into hers. "You didn't save me."

"Dash!" Saderia shot up in her bed with a gasp, her eyes wide and her heart hammering with fear. All the fur along her back bristled in terror. Hardly daring to breathe, she dug her claws into her blanket and whipped around to stare out at her darkened room, not knowing what she would find. All she saw were ominous shadows all around her room. She tried to swallow her fear, but her throat felt dry.

Broken moonlight filtered in through the window at the back of her room, casting eerie patches of light across her floor and creating shadows along the walls. A shiver raced down her spine. Pulling her blanket closer, she tore her eyes off the window and whipped around to face the dark door on the other end of her room, feeling the shadows close in on her. "Dash?" she whispered. The night was silent.

Slowly, Saderia took a deep breath and reluctantly pulled herself out of her bed. Suppressing a shiver, she opened the door to her room and slipped out to tiptoe down the long, shadowed hallway. She paused with a shiver of dread when she reached the archway leading into the front room. Thoughts of all the horrible things Rock had done to Dingo in the room flashed through her mind, making her shudder. Trying to shake it off, she darted quickly across the room and dove toward the front door. A chill washed over her when she cracked it open, letting in the cold night air, but she ignored it. Bracing herself against the cold, she slipped out through the door into the dark of night. With a soft sigh, she closed the door carefully behind her and sat back on the cold, damp grass, letting the moonlight wash over her. Her eyes slipped shut and a shiver raced through her as her mind suddenly spun with memories of the battle that had been fought right where she was sitting. Her eyes flew open and darted to the stars. A dull, worried shadow crossed her face and she let out a tired sigh. Why was this happening to her?

Why hadn't the nightmares gone away after a whole month had passed since the war? And why did they still terrify her so much? Why couldn't she just leave the war in the past and move on? Things were supposed to be calmer now that the forest and the desert were at peace, and yet she was still haunted by those horrible nightmares. Why was the war affecting her so much more than the others? Her friends had seen the exact

same things she had. They had seen the same animals following her into war. They had seen those animals fall to their enemies, and they had heard their last cries. Two of them had been on that ledge with her and felt the same fear she had, knowing that any minute they could fall. All of them had seen the horrors she had and lived through them. Yet she seemed to be the only one suffering.

Saderia let out a long, weary sigh and hung her head, feeling exhausted. She didn't want to be out in the darkness all alone. She wanted to be with her parents, but she couldn't. On the chance that her mother might fall back into the same lifeless, fearful state she had succumbed to before at the mention of any trouble, she wanted to keep her problems hidden from her and Makero. There wasn't anyone else she could talk to either. Part of her wanted to ask Cia and Uncle Jash if they were having nightmares like she was, but even if she did, they would probably just lie to try to assure her. More than anything, she wanted to go to Dash to tell him about her fears and nightmares, but she couldn't. After all, she wasn't sure if she even knew Dash anymore.

Saderia let out a hiss of mingled sorrow and frustration. She didn't even know how she felt about Dash anymore. On one hand, she knew he still cared about her and she doubted he would ever hurt her, but no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't shake off her doubts. The one thing she wanted above all else was to be his friend again, but she just didn't know how. After the war had ended, she had been confident that she and Dash would trust each other again, but now she just didn't know what to do. She wanted to talk to him, but she didn't know what to say. Every time she tried to get close to him, she couldn't help but doubt him. Even when she tried to tell herself that her worries were foolish, she couldn't help but wonder if he was hiding things from her. After all, if he had done it once, he could do it again. What if he was still meeting with Dastarius? What if Dastarius was telling him to say certain things to her just to get her to trust him? She doubted those fears were true and she hated being so paranoid...but they still made her wonder.

Saderia let out a soft, tense breath and looked back up at the stars. Maybe after she and Dash returned to school and settled in with the other animals, it wouldn't be so awkward and they would be able to trust each other again. School was where they had met and become friends, after all,

and it was in that time that they had chosen to remain friends even after she had found out who his father was. The thought filled her heart with the tiniest bit of hope. After all, if they had been able to overcome that obstacle, maybe they could overcome this one, as well.

An overwhelming sense of *déjà vu* washed over Saderia as she stared up at the familiar school building of WildWorld Elementary School, the place where she had met Dash and Loki, two of her oldest friends. It looked just as good as new. The stairs leading up to the wide double doors at the front of the T-shaped orange building had been repaired, and the holes in the flat ceiling of the school had been filled in. In the wide, grassy clearing spread out in front of the school, hundreds of students milled around, hanging out by the stairs or eagerly greeting old friends by the path leading off through the woods around the school. Bright, excited voices filled the air all around the clearing outside the school, bringing a weak smile to Saderia's face.

The tiger Princess stood between Dash and Jeb with her parents, Karenisha and Makero, and Jeb's parents, Telku and Jati, standing right behind them. Telku and Jati looked tense and uneasy surrounded by so many 'strange creatures,' but Jeb didn't seem to mind. If anyone was looking nervous, it was Dash, who seemed to keep to himself as much as possible. While the others gazed around at the lively clearing with excited eyes, Dash kept his gaze locked tensely on the ground, trying to hide his face behind his scruffy dark brown mane. Trying not to look at Dash, Saderia tore her eyes off the school and looked up when her mother took a step forward.

A weak smile shone on Karenisha's face despite the tension and worry glowing in her eyes. Letting out a soft sigh, she leaned down to nuzzle Saderia once, then pulled back to look at her with worried amber eyes. "Be careful today, all right? Your father and I will be here to pick you up as soon as school is over."

Saderia smiled a warm, reassuring smile. "Don't worry, Mom. I'm going to be fine. Nothing bad is going to happen to me here at school." She flicked her mother gently with her tail. "I'll see you guys later. I love you."

"We love you, too, Saderia. We'll see you later." Hiding the fear in her eyes, Karenisha squeezed up a weak smile, while Makero nodded with a

warm glimmer in his bright green eyes. After giving her a long, lingering glance, the Queen reluctantly turned and started to walk away with Makero close beside her, heading toward the woodsy path leading back into town. Karenisha's eyes lingered on Saderia even as she walked away, still shining with worry. Taking a deep breath, she made herself turn away when she stepped past Telku and Jati. Wordlessly, she nodded to the kraguers and started to lead them away from the school. Reluctantly, Telku and Jati fell into step beside her, casting fearful glances back at Jeb and seeming tense even when he gave them a half-hearted wave. With Makero guiding Karenisha with his tail and Karenisha ushering the two nervous kraguers along, the four of them padded past the crowds of students milling around the schoolyard and stepped out onto the dirt path leading into town. With one last look over their shoulders, they disappeared behind the trees, leaving Saderia alone with her friends outside WildWorld Elementary School.

Saderia let out a long sigh. Trying to shake off her worry for her mother, she turned to gaze out at the clearing and narrowed her eyes. Tensely flicking her tail, she gazed out at the students around her and hesitated, then slowly turned around to look back at Dash. "Dash?"

Instantly, Dash jumped at the sound of her voice and whipped around to face her with wide eyes. Bristling with surprise, he blinked a few times, then shook himself and nervously flattened his ears, trying to hide his unease and wishing he wasn't so jumpy. "Wh-What?"

Saderia blinked in surprise at his odd reaction, then just narrowed her eyes and frowned, trying not to let her bewilderment show. "Do you see Loki anywhere? Or anyone else for that matter, like Lizzie or Lily or Lisa?"

Dash shook his head and tried not to wince. He hoped he never saw Lily. The last memory he had of her was of seeing her pleading face as two thugs dragged her off to a prison he had ordered them to throw her in. Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath and tried to shake the images from his mind. Whatever he had done, he had still done it solely for the good of the forest and nothing else, even if Dastarius had led him to do it.

Saderia just frowned and turned to look closely out at the clearing. Just when she started to worry she might not see any of her old friends, a loud voice suddenly burst through the air. "Saderia!" Without warning, a sudden streak of tawny yellow fur shot toward her in a burst of speed.

Before Saderia could react, the spotted figure lunged toward her and bowled into her with a wild, excited cry, nearly knocking her to the ground.

With a gasp, Saderia just barely caught herself and whipped around to face her ambusher when she saw them streak past her out of the corner of her eye. Her eyes grew wide with shock when she whipped around and saw a sleek, spotted cheetah sitting calmly on the grass behind her, her scruffy tail curled around her paws and her bright green eyes shining. A haughty/friendly grin curled up the corners of her mouth. Saderia let out a gasp of surprise and felt her tail curl up in delight. “Loki!”

Her cheetah/leopard friend grinned back at her with bright green eyes and let out a friendly laugh. “It’s good to see you, Saderia. I just saw you with your parents—they’re looking much better, especially your mom. I take it everything’s going well with you.”

Saderia nodded happily and eagerly flicked her tail. “Yeah, everything’s great. My mom is doing a lot better.” She paused, then frowned, feeling her heart sink and her tail droop with a darker sense of dread and unease. “What...What about your dad? Is he all right?” She was almost certain that Loki’s father had been part of her army during the war. More than likely, he had come out alive, but probably not without battle scars.

To her relief, Loki just smiled and shrugged. “He’s fine. All his wounds healed up days ago, and now he just likes to sit around telling me and my brothers stories about how he outran, like, thirty thousand dingoes.” She rolled her eyes in good humor. “He likes to exaggerate a little.”

Saderia laughed lightly, unable to hide her relief. “I’m glad he’s okay.”

Loki nodded with a softer, more sober smile. “Me too.” She paused, then turned and glanced at Dash with raised eyebrows, giving him a playful push. “How about you, Mr. Quiet? Aren’t you happy to see me?”

Dash managed a weak smile, though he couldn’t help but feel uneasy around Loki. He almost winced at the thought. That just wasn’t normal. Loki was the most easygoing animal in the whole school—and probably the whole forest—even though she could have a bit of a temper when pushed. He normally felt fine around Loki, but now he felt really out of place. It was obvious Saderia felt the same sort of tension with him around. Maybe he should just get out of the way so she could be with one of

her true friends without feeling that tension. Plus, he couldn't help but worry that Loki might pick up on some of their feelings if he stuck around —she almost always did.

He paused tensely and tried to think of a safe response. "Hi, Loki," he finally murmured after a short beat of silence. "Yes, I'm happy to see you."

"Then why the silent treatment, huh?" Loki replied, giving him a leering grin and a playful flick of her tail.

Dash looked away, struggling for an excuse. "Sorry, I'm just...tired. That's all."

Loki raised an eyebrow. "Tired, huh? That's the oldest excuse in the book!" She glanced back at Saderia and pointed at Dash with a snicker and a playful grin. "Something's going on with your buddy there, Saderia. You might want to check that out."

While Dash felt his face go red with embarrassment, Saderia just raised an eyebrow, trying not to read into it too much. Silence fell over them.

With raised eyebrows, Loki glanced back and forth between them with bewildered green eyes and frowned. "What? Did I say something?"

"No," Saderia muttered, giving her a quick shake of her head and avoiding her eyes. "It's fine."

Loki shrugged. "If you say so." Not noticing the tension between her two friends, she glanced over their shoulders at the tiny kraguer standing nervously behind them who looked unsure of what to do. With a typical friendly smile, Loki waved to Jeb and lightly flicked her tail in greeting. "Hi!" she called. "What's your name again? Jeb?"

Jeb paused and nodded uncertainly, a wary look on his face.

Loki grinned. "Okay. Well, in that case, welcome to WildWorld Elementary, Jeb! I'll be happy to help Saderia show you around. After all, I helped her find her way when she first started going to school here."

Jeb blinked in surprise and hesitated, then gave her a curious look. "Really?"

Loki nodded and smiled. "Yep. It's pretty nice here and easy to get along once you get used to it. Oh, and if anyone gives you trouble, direct them to me and I'll teach them a lesson they won't soon forget."

Saderia rolled her eyes in good humor. “Yeah, you can count on her, Jeb. Loki specializes in making her ‘lessons’ unforgettable.”

“Well, I try,” Loki said with a mock humble bow, her teeth flashing in a wide grin.

Letting out a soft chuckle, Saderia looked back at Loki and raised her eyebrows, a more curious expression crossing her face. “So have you seen anyone else we know around here? Where’s Lisa?”

Loki just shrugged. “Lisa had to run back home because she forgot something, but she’ll be back any minute. I haven’t seen Grath yet, but I’m sure he’ll make an appearance soon. Word to the wise,” she added, raising an eyebrow at Jeb. “Seeing as how you’re not exactly what some losers would call ‘normal,’ stay away from Grath until I teach him that you’re on my side, meaning that if he messes with you, he’ll have to deal with my claws. That’ll take about...two seconds, tops.” While Jeb nodded nervously, Loki turned back to Saderia with a wide grin. “Oh, speaking of which, I *have* met my old nemeses.” Hiding a snicker, she whipped around to look over her shoulder and raised her voice to a shout. “Hey, L’s! Look what I found!”

Saderia’s eyes widened in shock. Feeling an overwhelming sense of *déjà vu* wash over her, she whipped around to face the direction Loki had turned to, her heart beating faster with surprise. She hadn’t heard anyone refer to Lizzie and Lily as ‘the L’s’ in a very long time. ‘The L’s’ was what Saderia, Dash, and Loki used to call Lizzie, Lily, and Lisa back when Lisa had hung out with them. Saderia had been enemies with the L’s, but ever since the hunters had invaded the forest and changed her whole life, the enmity had died.

When she turned to follow Loki’s gaze, her breath caught in surprise. A few paces away from them, a sleek lioness with a short, stunted tail and a dark panther sat side by side by the stairs, talking in hushed voices. At the sound of Loki’s voice, the two looked up in surprise, then narrowed their pale green and light blue eyes in two icy glares. Sharing a quick glance, the two girls rose to their paws and stalked toward them with prim, careful steps, sticking their noses up in the air. Side by side, they padded over to them and stopped just in front of Loki, sneering down at them with frosty glares that could have been an exact picture from Saderia’s memory if not for the playfulness behind them.

“Well, if it isn’t the cheepard and the Princess,” Lizzie sneered, raising an eyebrow and hiding a smile.

Saderia’s eyes widened. She hadn’t heard anyone call Loki a cheepard in a long time either. Usually, the L’s and a bully named Grath were the only ones who had the nerve to call Loki a cheepard, a word they had made up to represent a cross between a cheetah and a leopard.

“It’s the vultures!” Loki exclaimed. With a wide grin, she turned around to look at Saderia and chuckled when she saw her surprised face. Raising her eyebrows, she gestured to Lizzie and Lily with a light flick of her tail. “Saderia, I’d like to reintroduce you to the L’s. Just before you got here, we all made a vow to hate each other again now and for the rest of our lives. It makes things more interesting.”

Saderia tried to hide a grin. “Really? So we’re all enemies again?”

“Yep.” Loki snickered and raised an eyebrow. “If we weren’t, life just wouldn’t be right anymore. I figured it would help out the whole ‘getting back to normal’ process.”

Saderia laughed and shook her head with a smile. “I guess so.”

Lizzie smiled a sly smile, then glanced over Loki’s shoulder and froze. Taking a step back, she gazed at the tiny creature standing behind Saderia and her friends, her pale green eyes wide with shock and disbelief. “*What is that?*”

“Oh, right, I guess we should do some introductions.” Loki snickered and rolled her eyes, then just flicked her tail at Jeb. “Lizzie, this is Jeb, a creature from that other forest. Don’t you remember King Makero announcing that he was going to be living with us? I’m sure you caught a glimpse of him every now and then, too. Anyway, Jeb, this is Lizzie, an egotistical snob who will soon enjoy making our lives difficult. She thinks everything that breathes is a freak, which she is probably about to call you, so I’d advise you not to take it personally.”

Jeb blinked a few times in bewilderment. “Um...okay...”

Lizzie stared at Jeb in disbelief, her fur bristling and her eyes wide. “He *is* a freak! I mean, *literally!*” She paused, then glanced at Saderia out of the corner of her eye with a wry smile. “Let me guess—he’s *your* friend, isn’t he?”

Saderia rolled her eyes with a grin. “How’d you know?”

“You always seem to attract all the weirdos.” Raising an eyebrow, she waved at Dash. “Speaking of which, hi, weirdo.”

Dash blinked several times, then looked away and managed a sheepish wave. “Um...hi, Lizzie.”

Lizzie opened her mouth to reply, then broke off when a familiar voice suddenly split the air. “Hi, guys!”

Blinking in surprise, Saderia looked up with her companions just in time to see a small tawny leopard burst out from behind a crowd of students and stumble toward them, her fur ruffled and her expression flustered. With a faint smile, she darted toward them and skidded to a halt right in front of them, her gray blue eyes shining in the morning light. “Sorry I’m late!” She shrugged with an embarrassed smile. “I forgot something.” She paused, then glanced around at the five animals and smiled a shy smile. “Hi, Saderia and Dash! Hi, Lizzie and Lily!”

Saderia smiled at the leopard. “Hi, Lisa.”

“Hey, it’s about time you got here!” Loki grinned and flicked her friend with her tail. “Took you long enough! I’d have been there and back in about five minutes!”

Lisa swatted her with a shy smile. “That’s only because you’re half cheetah!”

Saderia giggled, then let out a quiet breath and turned to face Lisa with a warm but more serious smile. “Lisa, I don’t think you’ve met him, so I’d like to introduce you to a friend of mine who’s going to be in our class.” With a flick of her tail, she gestured to Jeb. “This is Jeb, an animal from the other forest we lived in for a while.”

“Oh, yeah, I heard about that,” Lisa murmured, her gray blue eyes widening with wonder and surprise. She paused, then narrowed her eyes with a nervous frown. “Is he, um...”

“He’s cool. Not dangerous at all,” Loki replied with a shrug. Flicking her tail, she nodded to Jeb and gestured to Lisa. “Jeb, this is Lisa, my best friend and an ex-L.”

Jeb managed a shy wave. “Hi.”

“Hi,” Lisa whispered nervously, her eyes still wide with incredulity.

“You’ll get used to him,” Saderia assured her, giving her a faint, knowing smile. When Lisa blushed and nodded, Saderia opened her mouth to say something else, then broke off when a low growl sounded behind her.

“Well, if it isn’t Princess and her group of freaks.” At the sound of the gruff voice, Saderia and her companions whirled around to see a burly panther stalking toward them. With a cold scowl and narrowed dark blue eyes, the panther stormed past them, giving all seven of them a dark glare.

While Saderia just raised an eyebrow, Loki gave him a mocking wave. “Hi, Grath. Long time no see. Did you get bored without someone to bully? Or someone to put you in your place, like me?”

Grath rolled his eyes and shot her a deadly glare. “Shut up, cheepard.”

Loki just raised an eyebrow and flicked her tail in response.

Ignoring her, Grath narrowed his eyes at Saderia with a grudging, reluctant scowl, seeming torn on how to react. After a heartbeat of silence, he rolled his eyes and let out an uncomfortable growl, directing his glare to the ground. “Hi, Princess,” he muttered under his breath after a moment of quiet. “Thanks for...well, getting us back here and all. But I still don’t like you,” he added quickly, looking up and glaring at her with flashing dark blue eyes.

Loki raised an eyebrow. “Some animals are just really hard to please.”

Saderia just shook her head. “That’s okay, Grath, because I don’t really like you either.”

Grath just rolled his eyes and started to turn away, then paused when he caught sight of Jeb. With an uneasy scowl, he glared at Jeb for a heartbeat of silence, then glanced back at Saderia and narrowed his eyes. “That’s one of your freaks, isn’t it?”

Loki answered for her. With a roll of her eyes, she just nodded and flicked her tail. “Yep. Jeb, Grath. Grath, Jeb.”

Grath narrowed his eyes, then just looked away and shrugged. “Whatever.” Without another glance at Jeb, he turned away and shoved past them, giving Dash an extra hard shove and mumbling under his breath. “Freak.”

Dash just rolled his eyes and stepped aside to let him pass. Shooting one last glare over his shoulder, Grath stalked away from them and stomped out into the clearing to find someone else to pick on. In seconds, he stormed into a crowd of cheerful students and disappeared from sight.

Shaking her head, Saderia turned back to her friends to continue their conversation, ignoring Grath. His interruption was quickly forgotten, but even so, Saderia couldn't help but cast Dash a quick glance out of the corner of her eye to make sure he was okay. Just like in the desert, he remained oddly quiet even while the rest of them talked about all the things that had happened since they had last seen each other.

She tried to ignore her unease and turned back to Loki and her other friends/enemies, determined to make the most out of the situation and enjoy their first conversation in a long time. Loki talked about her dad and his exaggerated stories about the war, while Lisa told everyone stories about what it had been like to be a healer during the battles. Lizzie told similar stories since her father had apparently been a healer, as well, while Lily told the others stories her mother had told her about being in combat. Saderia kept most of her own stories to herself and just listened, but Jeb eventually felt at ease enough to tell his own tales about his role as a runner in the battle. Eventually, he seemed to relax and feel much more at ease, even with Lizzie's mildly insulting comments about his strange appearance.

While most of the war stories weren't too horrible, Saderia couldn't help but picture the terrible battle all over again, including the awful scenes from her nightmares. The memories sent shivers down her spine, making her feel cold even in the warm morning air. Struggling to hide her fear, she tried to steer the conversation away from battle talk and change the subject to something less intimidating.

"By the way," she interrupted, pricking her ears up and gazing around at her companions with curious eyes. "Dash and Jeb and I went to go visit Dingo yesterday."

Loki pricked up her ears in interest. "Really? How's he doing?"

Saderia managed a faint smile. "He's doing great, and so are the rest of the dingoes. Speaking of which, I also met Bunny while I was there. She wanted to know if there was any way Tawny could visit the pack sometime so that they could see each other again."

Loki narrowed her eyes in a thoughtful frown. "That would be pretty cool. I see no reason why she couldn't. I'll have to ask Maeta about it when I get back home." She paused, then glanced up at the school building and flicked her ears. "Hey, we should probably head inside and see our

classroom again. It's getting a little late and class is probably going to start soon.”

“In that case, we should probably get away from you freaks,” Lizzie cut in, raising an eyebrow. “We really don’t want to be seen with you.” Sticking up her nose in a prim sniff and hiding a smile, Lizzie promptly turned to stalk toward the school, leading Lily away with a flick of her tail.

Saderia just grinned and rolled her eyes. With a flick of her tail to signal for the others to follow, she turned to lead the way toward the school building. When she and her friends pushed past the double doors at the top of the stairs into the school, Saderia felt a smile tug at her mouth. The wide atrium at the front of the school opened up before her eyes, completely unchanged since the last time she had seen it. Students swarmed through the huge, open room, bustling down the two hallways that led off to the left and right and talking in loud, excited voices. Falling into step with the crowds of students, Saderia led the way past the door to the Principal’s office on the right side of the atrium, then stepped out onto the left hallway to follow it down to the very end where the hallway holding her classroom veered off at the left. The second they stepped out into the wide hallway, Saderia’s eyes snapped to the double doors and clear windows on the left wall peeking into the enormous, cozy-looking school library.

A wistful smile tugged at Saderia’s mouth. With a soft sigh, she nudged Dash when they padded past the library and nodded to the familiar room. “Isn’t this great, Dash? We’re back at school again.” She flicked her tail toward the library. “Remember when we hung out together in the library?”

Dash glanced up at the library out of the corner of his eye and nodded briskly. “Yeah,” he muttered before looking back down, lost in thought.

Saderia blinked a few times, then just turned away, her heart feeling suddenly heavy with pain and regret. Part of her had hoped that being back at school would help her and Dash get along, but so far, that didn’t seem to be working. Hanging back, she let Loki take the lead, too lost in thought to find her way and point out new, important places to Jeb. Without even realizing it, she found herself reliving all her gruesome, blood-spattered memories of the war. With a shiver, she cursed them in her mind, not just for the pain and fear they had created but for driving her and Dash apart.

After all, Dastarius's whole plan seemed to have been hinged on using the war as a smokescreen to kill her. Saderia shivered internally and tried to shake off those thoughts. Even so, she couldn't help but wonder if things would ever be the same again.

Relief rose in Saderia's chest when they finally reached their classroom. The familiar atmosphere soothed her troubled thoughts. It was just as she remembered it: a small, cozy room with a big whiteboard up front covered in numbers, times, and instructions; a teacher's desk beside the whiteboard with an older leopard sitting at it; and dozens of desks lined up in rows facing the whiteboard, each filled with chatting, excited students. Only three seats in the front row and one in the second row remained empty.

"That's where we sit," Loki explained to Jeb, pointing to the empty chairs with her tail. "The seat on the end of the front row is mine, the seat next to it is Saderia's, and the one next to hers is Dash's. Lisa sits behind me." She paused and glanced out at the lively room, then looked back and gave Jeb a warm smile, seeing the nervous look on his face. "Oh, and don't worry about the rest of the kids here. They'll probably look at you funny for a few days, but eventually they'll get used to you."

Jeb blinked in surprise, then looked down and nodded nervously. "O-Okay. Um...where do I sit?"

"Don't worry. I'll take care of it." With a quick flick of her tail, Loki stepped into the room and turned to face the teacher's desk, raising her voice to be heard over the chatter of the other students. "Ms. Spot!"

At the sound of her name, the leopard teacher looked up from a bunch of papers on her desk and smiled when she saw Loki. "Loki! Welcome back to school!" With a kind nod, she looked past the cheetah and beamed when she saw the others. "It's good to see you, too, Saderia. And you, as well, Dash, Lisa." Nodding to each of them, she looked past them and froze when her eyes landed on Jeb. A flicker of shock crossed her face, but she quickly composed her features. Clearing her throat and hiding her unease, she stepped away from her desk to walk over to them. When she stopped in front of them, she leaned down to face the tiny creature, giving him a friendly look. "You must be Jeb." She smiled. "I'm Ms. Spot, your teacher. Welcome to school."

Jeb managed a timid wave. "H-Hi."

“Saderia and I were just showing him around,” Loki explained, gesturing to Jeb with a flick of her tail. “He needs a desk, too.”

“No problem.” Ms. Spot glanced back over her shoulder and gestured with her tail to the back of the room. “There’s one in the back. One of you could pull it up to the front.”

“Sure thing. I’ll get it.” With a wide grin, Loki whipped around and raced to the back of the classroom in a streak of yellow fur to find the desk.

While Lisa hurried to the back to help Loki, Ms. Spot turned back to face Saderia and Dash with bright, sparkling green eyes. “I haven’t seen you two in a while. How are things going?”

Saderia smiled politely. “We’re doing well. Everything’s sort of calmed down now, and my parents are doing well, too.”

Ms. Spot nodded respectfully, her eyes bright with sympathy. “I’m sure this has been a tough time for you. I’m very glad you were able to lead us through the war and everything else that has happened to us these past few months.” While Saderia shifted uncomfortably and tried to squeeze up a smile, Ms. Spot turned to Jeb to look him over. “This is the animal from the other forest, right?” When Saderia nodded, she hesitated, then smiled at him. “Well, I’m glad I’ll be able to teach someone from such a different place. You three can go ahead and take your seats. I’ll introduce Jeb for you, and then we can begin class.”

Saderia smiled. “Thanks, Ms. Spot.” Flicking her tail, she gestured for Dash and Jeb to follow her and led the way over to their seats while Loki and Lisa pulled a desk up beside Saderia’s. By that time, the eyes of nearly every student in the room had turned to Jeb, glimmering with undisguised curiosity. Saderia ignored them as she and her friends took their seats, but as she sat back and listened to Ms. Spot quiet the others and begin her introduction of Jeb, she couldn’t help but think about the war. Even though she wanted to hear Ms. Spot’s introduction of her friend and her opening words on their first day back at school, somehow she couldn’t. The teacher’s words seemed to fade away into the background until they were nothing but distant muttering. Against her will, Saderia’s mind wandered, replaying all the horrifying memories of the war and sending chills racing through her.

Shaking her head to push away the thoughts, Saderia forced herself to focus on Ms. Spot as she ended her introduction. To her dismay, though,

as soon as Ms. Spot finished her speech, she gazed out at the rows of quiet children with darker, more serious green eyes. Taking a deep breath, she gazed out at the children for a long moment of silence, then slowly spoke up in a soft, quiet voice tense with emotion. “Today, I’ve decided to do something different. Since this is our first day back to school in a long, long time, I don’t think it’s right to try to just jump back to where we were. A lot has happened these past few months that has affected us all, and I think it would be a good idea to talk about some of these things, clear up some confusion, and try to get rid of some fear and pain.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Saderia glanced back at the students behind her as Ms. Spot spoke, and blinked in surprise. Whereas she had expected at least a few students to look snide or disinterested, every student sat silent, watching Ms. Spot intently with wide eyes glimmering with relief and gratitude. Turning back around to the teacher, Saderia pricked her ears when Ms. Spot continued, “All of our students and their struggles will be respected. If a student disrespects or ridicules anyone in this classroom, this will be not only their first day of school, but also their last.”

Everyone in the classroom nodded quietly, exchanging cautious whispers. With narrowed, thoughtful eyes, Ms. Spot gazed around at the students in silence, then flicked her tail and raised her eyebrows in an invitation to speak. “Now...would anyone like to talk about the war? Does anyone have a question or any fear or concern they would like cleared up?”

Silence fell over the room. For several long heartbeats of quiet, none of the students said a word. A few exchanged cautious, unsure glances, but didn’t speak. Silence reigned in the classroom. After a long, tense hesitation, a few students slowly started to speak up in quiet, nervous voices, their eyes flicking uncertainly back and forth. One by one, more students started speaking up in stronger voices, hiding their uncertainty. Several students still remained tensely silent, uncertain about speaking up. As others spoke about their own experiences, though, gradually they started to join in. In minutes, the room was filled with tales of the war.

As the day went on, Saderia heard many sad and frightening stories of the war that only increased her guilt and fear. Many of the students had a parent who had joined the army during the war. Most of their parents had come out alive, but with injuries and terrifying tales. A few students had parents who were still being cared for, unable to go home and be with their

families due to severe injuries. One student had lost their father. Then there were animals like Lisa who had experienced some part of the war firsthand as healers or runners. When they had been in the clearing, Lisa hadn't seemed so traumatized by the experience, but when she spoke about it, Saderia could hear the fear and pain in her voice. Some of the students and their families had been captured by Rock and locked up in Saderia's house, which had served as a prison during the dingo tyrant's reign. They had seen some very, very disturbing things. As it turned out, Lily had actually been one of the prisoners. When she talked about it, Dash seemed to sink lower in his seat, as if trying to hide. Vaguely, Saderia wondered if he had known she had been a prisoner while he had been pretending to be Rock's partner. Loki managed to keep the mood relatively light by telling joking, exaggerated stories her father had told her, but the air still felt tense with old pain and regret.

Almost everyone had a story to tell once they began opening up. More than likely, this was their first chance to talk about it. A lot of the students probably didn't want to talk about their fears at home and upset their parents, so now was their only chance to get it out. When they spoke, many of them seemed embarrassed at first, but as the other students shared their own stories, they seemed to relax, seeming relieved that they wouldn't be mocked for their fears. Only a few of them still seemed sad, though a lot of them still appeared scared. Hours passed by and almost everyone had a chance to speak.

After listening to stories for hours, Ms. Spot finally broke in during a quiet moment in the conversation. With sad green eyes, she glanced at Saderia with a nod and spoke up in a soft, subdued voice tinged with sympathy. "Saderia? Would you like to talk about the war? I'm sure it must have been especially stressful for you."

Saderia blinked in surprise and looked up at the teacher with wide eyes, her heart skipping a beat. She wanted her to talk about the war? *Here*? Perhaps it would make it easier to deal with her fears if she spoke to someone about them, but she couldn't do it here in class in front of all these animals who barely knew her. How could she tell them what it was like to lead a group of animals to what might be their death? How could she tell them how guilty she felt? How could she tell them about the fear she had felt when she had been dangling from that ledge when they had never

known such fear—when she had spent the past month keeping up appearances and pretending she was fearless? How could she tell them that she still had nightmares about the war? How could she tell them how agonizing it was that the war had cost her one of her closest friends?

Glancing back at all the relieved expressions on the faces of the students behind her, Saderia knew she couldn't tell them any of that. Their stories were bad enough without having to hear hers. Taking a deep breath, she looked up at Ms. Spot as calmly as possible and managed to smile a polite, fake smile. "No, Ms. Spot, I'm fine. I'm sure you've all heard about the plan to take down Rock, bring my mother back, and all that, so there's really nothing else to tell." As she spoke, she could feel Dash's eyes boring into her fur, but when she turned to look at him, he promptly turned away.

Ms. Spot blinked a few times, then gave her a sympathetic frown. "Are you sure?"

Saderia nodded and opened her mouth to assure her, but never got a chance to speak. Before she could say a word, a tiny lynx in the back row looked up with wide eyes and raised her voice in a curious call. "What was the plan to take down Rock? I never really got that."

"Yeah, and what exactly did Rock do to the Queen?" another student called out, his voice thick with curiosity. "And didn't he use your house as a prison or something?"

Somewhere in the middle rows, a lion looked up and tipped his head to the side with a frown. "What exactly was the war even about? I mean, I know that dingo guy had the Queen and stuff, but what about the dingoes? And why did Rock take over the forest for a while?"

While Saderia looked around in surprise, Ms. Spot narrowed her eyes at her with a curious frown, her voice cautious but wondering. "Saderia...if you're truly all right...then could you perhaps come up to the front and explain the war for the rest of us so that we all can understand? You are the Princess, after all. You must know all of these things. You organized most of the attacks and came up with just about all of the strategies, didn't you?"

Saderia froze and stared at the teacher with wide, stunned eyes. Dash's eyes returned to her, but she barely noticed. Feeling numb with shock and alarm, Saderia slowly looked back out of the corner of her eye to stare at the hopeful students sitting behind her. All of them stared back at

her with eager, inquisitive eyes, not seeming to notice the tension about her. Saderia's heart skipped. Slowly, she turned back to the front, her mind whirling. Deep down, past the fear and unease in her mind, she knew she had to do it. It was her job, after all. Even if Ms. Spot hadn't asked her to, she should have done it on her own. She was the Princess of the forest. It was her duty to assuage the animals' fears. Still, if there was one thing she hated about being a Princess, it was all the propaganda.

Taking a deep breath, she forced the thoughts away and pushed herself to her paws. Feeling numb, she slowly paced to the front of the classroom, uncomfortably aware of Dash and Loki's eyes boring into her skin. When she reached the front of the classroom and gazed out at the crowd of students watching her with eager, questioning eyes, burning her skin with their penetrating gazes, she hesitated for a long time, then shook herself and forced herself to smile as warmly and hopefully as she could—a deceptive trick she had grown used to. As calmly as possible, she made herself speak up in an even voice to explain everything—how the war had started, how she had met the outcasts, why she had teamed up with them, how she had found out that Rock had kidnapped Karenisha, and so on.

The memories tumbled through her mind as she spoke, sending shivers through her that she tried to hide. Keeping the smile plastered on her face, she told them how the war had started without hearing her own words. As though her mind were locked away in a place too far away to hear her own voice, she described how the war had started and what had happened after Rock had taken over the forest. "When Rock took over the forest, he captured Dingo and..." She broke off mid-sentence, feeling her heart skip and her mind go blank with fear. A memory of running through the forest with the scent of blood hanging in the air and the sound of Dingo's last howl ringing in her ears flashed through her mind. An icy chill washed over her, making her breath catch. It was the same feeling she got every time she passed the spot in her house where Dingo had been tied down and tortured—the place where his blood had stained the floor. Suppressing a shudder, she shook it off and continued.

"...I had to run away and take shelter in a house in the woods..." She balked and trailed off again, her heart skipping a beat. The house she had sheltered in had been Dastarius's house. At the time, she had found it ironic, but now it made her sick. The fear she had felt when she had hidden

in that house, along with all the memories of the horrible things Dastarius had done so long ago, flashed through her mind. She struggled to shake it off.

“We freed the prisoners...” she mumbled numbly. “And after that... the final battle began...”

Memories flickered through her mind. Dingoes and forest animals locked in deadly combat, the fear of her friends being hurt or even killed by her enemies, the pain of the wounds inflicted on her, the horror of seeing Rock’s monstrous den up close, fighting with Rock, dangling from the ledge and holding on for dear life, Dastarius laughing as she struggled to pull herself up, Dash staring down at her with horrified eyes, her own heart pounding in her chest as she hung there, never knowing whether she would live or die or if she would ever see her mother and her friends again...

Saderia blinked several times and struggled to pull herself out of the horrible memories that had overcome her. For a moment, the classroom almost seemed to disappear before her eyes, while the battlefield loomed up right in front of her. For a split second, all she could see was a sea of bloody bodies fighting across a wide expanse of sand while her ears rang with the agonized screams and snarls of the fighters and her heart pounded with fear. Terror streaked down her spine, raising all the fur along her back. With a violent shudder, she shook herself and forced herself to continue in a cracked, wavering voice.

“And then we won. And now everything’s fine.”

Blinking several times as if not hearing her own words, she forced herself to look up at her classmates, as if needing to prove to herself that they were still there. A sea of hopeful faces stared back at her.

It was as if there were a wall between them. They were over there. Hope was over there. And she was on the other side, all alone.

Chapter Five

Tension

I don't know what came over me. It was my first day back at school, and I thought I was happy to be there. When I got there, I WAS happy to be there. It was nice to see Loki and Lisa and all the others, and I was glad that things seemed to be getting back to normal. But then, in class, we started talking about the war and I just couldn't get the memories of it out of my head. It was like some kind of flashback or something. It was almost like my Dream sense took over—like it was warning me of something—but that can't be right because the visions were nothing but flashbacks. They don't have anything to do with the future.

Still, since they remind me so much of those flashes I get from my Dream sense, they're so scary. I feel like something's going to happen. I feel like I'm all alone. Everyone else seems to have recovered from the battle, but I just...haven't. I mean, usually, I'm fine during the day. I can get along fine, but if anyone mentions the war or if something reminds me of it, I just get scared and nervous. Sometimes I just think of it out of the blue and it terrifies me. I freeze and it's like I'm back in the battle again. I have nightmares, too. I don't know what's wrong with me. Everyone else has moved on, but I can't for some reason. And I don't want to be the scared little girl I was back in Jeb's forest. I want to be the strong leader I was during the war. I want to be me again. Why can't I get over this? Why can't I be normal again? Why can't I talk to Dash anymore?

Saderia lifted the pencil from her diary before she could get carried away. Taking a deep breath, she shakily closed the book and stashed it away in the drawer of her bedside table to stop herself from working herself up into a frenzy. Nonetheless, as she lay back in her bed, the same thoughts kept repeating in her mind: how she had frozen up in class during her

speech about the war, how Loki had mentioned something was ‘wrong’ with Dash, how she and Dash hadn’t said a word to each other all day long... Of course, memories of the war still whisked through her head, lurking at the very back of her mind as if just waiting for the right moment to ambush her.

With a weary sigh, she shook her head to try to push the thoughts away, but no matter what she did, she couldn’t get them out of her head. She wanted to talk to someone to ask them why she was feeling this way, but there was no one to talk to. Dash was unreachable, and Karenisha, Makero, Cia, and Uncle Jash were still recovering from the scare when Karenisha had gone missing. Loki was just a casual friend who didn’t know much about what was *really* troubling her and she only saw her at school, anyway. Jeb was already dealing with enough changes now that he had to go to school with her and Dash. Dingo was miles away. Claw was a ghost who hadn’t talked to her in a month and whose visits were anything but consistent. There was virtually no one she could talk to, so the only thing she could do was go it alone.

Saderia glanced at the drawer where she had hidden her diary and briefly wondered if she could find some way to mail it to Dingo, since he seemed to be the only one she had any hope of talking to. Maybe she could have someone run it over to the desert for her and give it to Dingo while she went to school and tried to keep busy with her normal life. But no, that wouldn’t be right. Dingo was already busy, and the animal she sent might get hurt in the desert by Rock’s old followers. Sending someone there just to make herself feel better wouldn’t be right. So again, she was stuck.

With a long, weary sigh, Saderia leaned back and closed her eyes, wishing Ms. Spot had assigned her homework. She needed something to take her mind off things...

A million visions raced through Dash’s mind in quick, almost indistinguishable flashes, each faster and bloodier than the last. The battlefield, Rock, Dastarius, Saderia dangling from the ledge, Karenisha, Saderia’s house, the prison, torturing Dingo, hatred, violence, revenge, *blood*. Indistinct, bone-chilling images whirled through his mind. One minute, all he could see was Saderia scrabbling desperately at the edge of Rock’s monstrous den with paws flecked with gore, her back legs swinging

helplessly over miles of bloodstained, howling animals lunging for each other's throats. Only now she was Karenisha, staring up at him with wide, fearful amber eyes as dingoes howled for her blood.

Blood. Dingo was lying in a pool of it on the floor of Dash's own house while Rock tormented him, his dull, lifeless brown eyes boring into Dash's, pleading with him. A new crowd of prisoners was ushered inside by a horde of canine brutes. Lily was one of them. She stared at him with light blue eyes full of terror and betrayal while the dingoes pushed her past Dingo's bloody, broken body.

The desert. Dash was standing atop the ledge of Rock's dark, enormous den, staring down at leagues of dingoes howling praise at him for all the blood he'd shed. Dastarius stood beside him and watched. Rock would never suspect he was the enemy. In a flash, the desert below him suddenly erupted in a brutal battle in a wild explosion of red. Animals tumbled across the blood-streaked sand, snarling and screaming at the tops of their lungs. Blood seemed to spill out from the battlefield like a lake, threatening to drown the desert and the forest. Dash tried to run away, but his paws stuck in the blood. No matter how much he struggled to get away, the blood clung to his paws, dragging him back toward the battle.

Through the haze of blood and darkness, a tiny black pup suddenly appeared just beyond the lake of blood, her shadowed fur as clear as day even as blackness crept over the scene. Her knowing amber eyes bored into his, glinting with amusement. A sneer curled up the corners of her mouth.

“You have blood in your claws.”

“It’s not my fault!”

Dash jumped awake in his bed with a gasp, his eyes wide and his heart pounding with terror. Blinking rapidly and taking in harsh, shallow gasps of air, he whipped around to look at his shadowy room. He could practically hear his own heart thudding in the silence and taste the cold sweat making his messy mane cling to his face. Hardly daring to breathe, he stared at the shadows with wide eyes, seeming to stare straight through them. An icy chill raced down his spine. Taking a shuddering breath, he started to push his blanket back with trembling paws to investigate the room, then yelped and almost jumped through the ceiling when a soft voice whispered through the darkness.

“What’s not your fault?”

Dash’s heart stopped. With a strangled gasp, he whirled around to face the doorway and almost jumped out of his skin. Saderia stood in the cracked doorway to his room, not letting out a single breath or making a sound to announce her presence. Her amber eyes glowed through the darkness, shining with wonder. When she caught the stunned look on his face, she frowned and nervously took a step back without saying a word, her expression dark with unease. Silence spread out between them.

Blinking several times as if not realizing what he was seeing, Dash stared at her blankly, his mind whirling from the nightmare. Taking in shaky, shallow breaths, he stared at her with wide eyes and frantically shook his head, forcing himself to speak up in a voice more of a gasp than a whisper. “S-Saderia? Wh-What are you doing here?”

He regretted it the minute he heard his own harsh tone. With a sigh that broke the spell between them, Saderia lowered her head with dull, defeated eyes and started to turn around. “Sorry. I’ll go.”

“No, wait!” With a frantic gasp, Dash dove out of his bed, as if hoping to stop her. When Saderia turned back around to face him with a frown, he froze, struggling to think of something to say. Every part of him wanted desperately to tell her about the dream and his own guilt, but he was too scared to say anything. He had done some bad things during the time of Rock’s rule that he really didn’t want Saderia to know about just yet. So far, he had told her everything about Dastarius...but he hadn’t told her all the things he had done as a result of Dastarius’s influence.

Silence spread out between them, making the air itself feel thick with discomfort.

Narrowing her eyes, Saderia looked away from him and took a step back, her voice a soft, emotionless murmur. “I just came in here to wake you up so we could get ready for school. We have to leave in fifteen minutes. That’s all.”

“Oh...” Dash blinked several times, then slowly looked down at his paws, his tail drooping with disappointment. He couldn’t think of anything else to say. Tension seemed to crackle between them, growing stronger and stronger with each second they remained silent. Wordlessly, the two of them stood still in silence, awkwardly staring at the ground and searching for something to say.

Out of the corner of her eye, Saderia looked up at Dash and studied him closely, wanting to ask him about his nightmare but not sure how he would react. After a long moment of hesitation, she took a deep breath and forced herself to speak up in a tone that sounded strained even to her. “What was your dream about?”

Instantly, Dash tensed and turned away from her, his eyes clouding with unease. “Nothing,” he muttered. “It was just a stupid dream about the usual stuff. You know, the battle...and all that.”

Saderia blinked and felt a chill race through her. As if at the mere mention of the battle, all her own memories of the war suddenly flooded her mind. Her own nightmare she had only just woken up from flickered right before her eyes, filling the darkened room with its haunting images. A shudder racked her body and she hastily turned away, hiding the fear in her eyes. Giving herself a quick shake, she struggled to force the horrible memories out of her head. Struggling to think of something to say so that she didn’t appear afraid, she just looked down at her paws and hid her eyes. “Oh...”

Dash stared at her for a long moment, seeing something almost like fear flit across her face. His heart skipped with alarm and his blood ran cold. Was that fear because of him? Had he said something to upset her? Was it *him* she was afraid of? Nervously, he tried to swallow back his fears and awkwardly shuffled his paws. “I guess...if school’s starting...well, we should probably get ready, huh?”

Saderia let out a sigh and managed a curt nod. “Yeah, I guess.” She paused and looked at him once out of the corner of her eye, then hastily looked away, her expression unreadable. With a tense flick of her tail, she took a step back, tossing a few stiff words awkwardly over her shoulder. “I’m sorry you...had a nightmare.” Without another word, she hastily turned to walk away, slipping back out through the crack in the door.

Dash sharply lifted his head, his heart skipping with hope. “I’m...”
The door banged shut.

His ears drooped and his heart sank with regret. As he stared at the closed door, his last words whispered out in a sigh. “I’m sorry, too...”

Silence hung in the crisp morning air. Listening to the distant birdsong flitting through the forest—the only sound in the silent woods—

Saderia and Dash stood side by side in the middle of the dirt path leading away from their house, gazing out into the woods. Both held book bags slung over their shoulders, packed with the few school supplies they needed. After saying goodbye to Saderia's parents, the two of them had set off down the woodsy path to walk to school and stopped in the middle of the trail to wait for Jeb to join them. With no walking to do to keep them occupied, the usually cool morning air felt thick and tense.

Soundlessly, the two of them stood side by side in the center of the dusty old path. Both kept their eyes trained on the dense woods rising up just on the side of the path, searching for any sign of Jeb and avoiding each other's eyes at all costs. Awkwardly, they shuffled their paws through the dirt, but didn't speak as they waited for the tiny creature. Minutes dragged by like hours. The silence hanging over them felt heavier than a blanket. With each second that passed, the tense quiet grew thicker and thicker until it was so tangible it was hard to breathe.

With an uncomfortable flick of her tail, Saderia glanced awkwardly up at the sky, avoiding Dash's eyes. "I wonder where Jeb is," she murmured just to break the silence.

Dash shrugged uneasily and looked down at his paws. "Maybe he slept in?"

Saderia just shrugged in response and didn't reply. Silence crept over them. Minutes ticked by.

Flattening his ears with a nervous scowl, Dash lowered his head and frantically scanned the woods with his eyes for any sign of their strange friend, wishing he would show up already so that they could start moving and leave the awkward silence behind. Unfortunately, their little friend was nowhere in sight.

Saderia glanced at Dash curiously out of the corner of her eye, then looked down at the ground and tensely flicked her tail. "If Loki says Maeta will let Bunny visit the pack with us, do you want to go visit Dingo next weekend?"

Dash looked up in surprise and frowned, feeling his fur prickle with a hint of resentment. "So soon?"

Saderia blinked and shot him a confused glance. "By the time we go there again, almost a whole week will have passed since we last saw him. That's not exactly soon. Besides, I miss him and the others. Don't you?"

“Uh...yeah,” Dash muttered, avoiding her eyes. “That...would be fine...I guess.” Wincing at his dull, strained voice, he shot Saderia a glance out of the corner of his eye and nearly flinched when he saw a hurt, confused look cross her face at his...less than excited response. Maybe if he’d acted more enthusiastic, they could have started an actual conversation. Talking about anything—even Dingo—would have been better than the silence. With a tense, awkward frown, he shuffled his paws and kept his gaze locked on the ground. After a moment of uncomfortable silence, he bit his lip and hesitated, then looked up and forced himself to blurt out the first thing that jumped into his mind, hoping to make small talk—something he’d never been particularly good at. “Do...do you think Tawny will be happy to see Bunny?”

As soon as the words left his mouth, he froze, wondering if that was the right thing to say or if Saderia had already moved on to something more interesting to think about.

Resisting the urge to roll his eyes at himself, he silently cursed himself for being so jumpy. At the same time, he couldn’t help but want to shift the conversation away from Bunny, even if it meant returning to the awkward silence. Out of all the things he could have chosen to talk about, she was one thing he preferred *not* to think about and discuss. Bunny just kind of...bothered him. Even though she was just a pup, he didn’t really like her. Come to think of it, as of late, he wasn’t sure he liked any dingoes, but that point was moot. His sudden unease when it came to the little black pup probably had something to do with his nightmare. Bunny had been the one who had said those words—‘You have blood in your claws’—in real life. In his whole life, he had only had that one minor encounter with her that hadn’t really stuck out much at the time, but now those words haunted him.

Saderia just nodded absently, unaware of his chaotic thoughts. “Yes, I’m sure she will be. Loki and Maeta will probably be happy to see Lightning again, too.”

Dash just nodded distractedly.

More silence.

After a tense heartbeat of lingering quiet, Saderia hesitated, then looked over at him uncertainly. “You do *want* to go to the desert...don’t you?”

Dash blinked in surprise and sharply looked up to stare at her with wide eyes, then gave her a hasty nod. “Yeah, of course,” he lied. “Why wouldn’t I?”

Saderia just shrugged and looked away. “I don’t know. Never mind.” She stared at the woods for another tense moment of silence, then glanced back up at Dash with a faint frown, trying to think of something to say. “So...are you glad to be back at school again? To see Loki...and all the others?”

Dash nodded quickly and tried to squeeze up a smile. “Yeah, definitely. Are you?”

She nodded, as well, and looked down at her paws. “Yes.” She paused, then flicked her eyes to him with a more curious frown. “So...if it’s all right with Loki, do you think it would be okay if we went to go hang out with her and Lisa sometime after school? You know, at the Home of the Leopards?”

“Sure,” Dash replied, hiding a wince and keeping his eyes locked on the woods. “That would be...fine.”

“Good.” Without another word, Saderia looked back at the woods to continue waiting for Jeb, signaling the end of the conversation.

Thick silence settled over them. Without a single word to break the quiet, the two of them sat back beside each other without meeting each other’s eyes, watching the woods and occasionally looking up at the sky as if to check the time by the position of the sun. Just when Dash started to wonder if Jeb was doing this on purpose, a thick clump of undergrowth just beyond the path trembled. With a shrill, nervous gasp, Jeb suddenly leapt out from behind the bush and stumbled frantically out onto the path, nearly tripping over his own book bag. Gasping for breath, he looked up at their surprised faces with wide blue/green eyes and let out a shaky gasp. “S-Sorry I’m late, guys! I guess I must have overslept.”

Saderia gave him a reassuring smile, feeling an overwhelming sense of relief. “It’s okay, Jeb, as long as you’re here now.” With a soft sigh, she looked ahead and smiled, flicking her tail to signal for her friends to follow her. “Let’s just get going. We’re not learning anything by standing here.”

The first half of the school day was mostly uneventful. Saderia waved to Loki and Lisa when she and her friends met them in their

classroom, but they didn't have time to say anything to each other before class began. Unlike yesterday, Ms. Spot started the day more normally by reintroducing them to what they had been learning before all the... weirdness had started. Saderia was grateful that no one seemed to want to discuss the war anymore, and for the most part, she coasted through the day without giving in to the tension between her and Dash. Leaving herself no more room to feel awkward, she focused all of her attention on school and chose to ignore the guilty and sad looks Dash cast her throughout the day. It made things a bit easier.

Lunch was a different story. It was the one part of her school day Saderia had been dreading all morning long. All throughout class, she had half-hoped that someone would misbehave so badly Ms. Spot would give them all assigned seats at lunch so that Saderia wouldn't have to deal with the uncomfortable issue of who to sit by, but alas, that had not happened. Standing awkwardly in the entrance to the wide cafeteria filled with bright voices and the mouthwatering scent of food, Saderia stared out at the bustling lunchroom, her mind whirling with awkward decisions and worries.

As stupid as it seemed, she hesitated to join the table where the rest of her class sat because she didn't know who to sit by...and who *not* to sit by. Clearly, it would only make things worse to try to avoid Dash, so sitting beside him was inevitable, even if she partly didn't want to. What made it difficult was trying to decide whether she should sit alone with Dash or together with Loki and Lisa. She wanted to sit with Loki and Lisa to catch up with them, but she distinctly remembered the air of discomfort that had followed Dash around all day yesterday whenever she had been around her other friends, and she didn't want him or them to feel uncomfortable again. Not only that, but she half-hoped that if she sat alone with Dash, they could find some way to start a conversation and maybe stop acting so uncomfortable around each other. That wasn't going to happen, though, even if she did sit away from Loki and Lisa. Jeb would probably sit by them when he found them, so they wouldn't be alone, making her plan useless.

When she thought about it, it all seemed so childish, so she forced the thoughts away and decided to just do what she felt was best. With a heavy sigh, she tried to keep her expression calm and padded over to the table full of chatting students just as Dash and Jeb walked toward it,

carrying lunches with fresh stream still rising off of them. Meeting them in front of the table, she flicked her tail to signal for them to follow and led them down the side of the table, trying not to trip over the crowds of students sitting around the benches. When she caught sight of Loki and Lisa sitting on the other side of the table, she instantly veered toward them and sat down in front of them, gesturing for Dash and Jeb to do the same.

When Loki and Lisa looked up and grinned at her, Saderia managed a wide, fake smile. “Is it okay if we sit here?”

Loki nodded and beamed. “Sure, make yourselves at home.” She held out a piece of food from her tray. “Want some? It’s good.”

Saderia shook her head with a smile. “No, thanks. We’ve got our own lunches.” While Dash and Jeb sat down beside her, she started to pick at her food to eat, then paused and looked up in surprise when Loki flicked her with her tail.

The cheetah/leopard gave her a wide grin and eagerly twitched her ears. “Oh, hey. I’ve been meaning to tell you something. I talked to Maeta yesterday, and she said she’d love for Tawny to go see Bunny again—she said Tawny’s been whining and begging to go see her for a whole month!”

Saderia stifled a giggle. “Really?”

Loki nodded with a grin. “Yeah. I can attest to it, that’s for sure.” Hiding a giggle, she arched an eyebrow and faced her with glowing green eyes. “So Tawny can go with you when you next visit the pack. Of course, Maeta’s going with her, and if it’s all right with you, I’d like to come, too.”

Saderia beamed. “That would be great. I’d love for you to come.” She glanced over at her leopard friend with curious eyes. “What about you, Lisa? Do you want to come, too?”

Lisa shook her head with a shy smile. “No, thanks. I don’t really know anyone over there that well. I’m sure you guys will have fun, though.”

“All right, that’s fine.” With a shrug, Saderia turned back to Loki and grinned. “We’re going to go this Saturday. Dingo promised to meet us on the border between the desert and the forest with some of his pack members so he can lead us to the dingo camp. There have been some... issues with some of Rock’s old followers...”

“Ah.” Loki nodded with a look of understanding. “Say no more. I’ll remember to keep my claws unsheathed, just in case.”

"I don't think we have to worry about it too much," Saderia assured her.

Loki just waved her worries away with a flick of her tail. "It's no problem. There will be more than enough of us to protect Tawny if Dingo's going to meet us with some of his pack members." She paused, then flicked her tail at Dash with a playful grin. "You and Jeb will save us, right?"

Dash blinked in surprise, then just turned away and nodded distractedly. "Yeah, sure," he muttered.

Loki raised an eyebrow at him for a long beat of silence, then just shook her head and gave Saderia a sardonic grin, gesturing to Dash with a flick of her tail. "I think Dash got knocked on the head a few times too many."

Saderia tried to hide a grin, though her heart skipped with unease at her words. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Dash look up once to give Loki a semi-playful glare, then just look back down. Hiding her uncertainty, Saderia turned away from Dash and tried to avoid his eyes. Erasing the discomfort on her face, she silently took a deep breath and looked back at Loki with wondering eyes. "By the way, would it be okay if Dash and I came to visit you sometime during the week?"

Loki nodded eagerly and grinned. "Sure. If your parents are okay with it, I can take you to my house Friday after school."

Saderia's eyes brightened with excitement. "That would be great!"

Loki just grinned. "Great. I guess I'll see you then. In the meantime, just take care of yourself and don't stress too much about school. We'll be able to have more fun Friday." She paused, then cast a long, unreadable glance at Dash. When she looked back at Saderia, her eyes shone with a dark sense of knowing. With a sad smile, she stared into Saderia's eyes and nodded her head toward the lion, dropping her voice to a quiet murmur. "Take care of Dash, too."

Crickets chirped in the darkness just outside Saderia's shadowed window. Leaning closer to the shining lamp propped up on her bedside table, Saderia stared down at the textbooks and homework she had laid out across her bed, lost in thought. Her eyes roamed over the problems, but no matter how many times she read each one, they never quite seemed to register in her mind. Biting back a sigh, she shifted closer to the lamp on

her wide blue bed and started to rearrange the cluster of textbooks and papers, then froze when a soft knocking sounded just outside her shadowy room.

Pushing the door open a crack, Karenisha poked her nose through the doorway to peer inside, her wide amber eyes shimmering with curiosity and concern. When she caught Saderia's eyes, she gave her a warm look and lightly tapped on the frame of the door. "Can I come in?"

Saderia nodded hastily, pushing her books and homework to the side and scooting back on her bed. With a faint smile, Karenisha pushed open the door to her room and crept inside, her striped tail flicking tensely back and forth. Despite the warm look on her face, a troubled shadow clouded her amber eyes, making her expression seem strained with concern. Worry instantly shot through Saderia like lightning when she saw the anxiety on her mother's face. Hastily, she pushed herself up into a sitting position and patted the messy blanket beside her, indicating for her mother to sit down. When the Queen leapt up onto the soft bed beside her, Saderia gazed up at her with worried amber eyes and tensely flicked her tail. "Mom? Are you okay? What's wrong?"

Karenisha gave her a weak, sad smile. "Nothing, Saderia. I'm fine. I'm just worried about you."

Saderia blinked in surprise. "Me?" Unease stirred in her chest, making her heart beat faster. The last time her mother had worried about her, it had ended disastrously. With the most convincing look she could manage, she smiled up at her mother and waved her worries away with a flick of her tail. "Why is that? I'm fine."

"No..." Karenisha shook her head sadly, a deep frown creeping across her face. "You act like it, but something's wrong. I can tell. You seem...upset sometimes. And tired."

Saderia shrugged weakly, forcing her smile not to waver. "I've just had a rough couple of months, Mom. I'll be fine, really."

Again, Karenisha shook her head, her eyes sad. "No." She hesitated, then slowly looked down at her paws, her eyes clouding with understanding and regret. "It's because of the war, isn't it?" When Saderia looked up at her in surprise, she sighed and lowered her eyes to the floor. "Lately, you seem so troubled and upset. I know how horrible the war was, especially for you

—your father told me that you were the one in charge of it. It must have been really hard on you...and that's why you're so upset now, isn't it?"

Saderia's smile faltered, but she struggled to keep it in place. With a quiet sigh, she rested her tail gently on her mother's shoulder. "I won't lie that the war was hard, Mom, but I'm fine now. Really. There's nothing that can hurt me anymore."

"I know," Karenisha murmured. She paused, then slowly turned to stare at Saderia with a dark, knowing glint in her eyes. "But I know it still bothers you." With a weary sigh, she looked away and flicked her gaze down to the ground, her shoulders slumping with defeat and her eyes dimming with a dull, clouded look. "I'm sorry for what I did," she whispered. "I don't know what was wrong with me, and I shouldn't have run away from Jeb's forest. I know the war was my fault."

Saderia's eyes widened with alarm and she instantly grabbed her mother's shoulder, forcing her to turn around to face her. "It was *not* your fault!" she exclaimed. "Rock was the one who kidnapped you, Rock was the one who exiled and tormented all those dingoes, and Rock was the one who tried to take over the forest. The war was his fault, not yours."

Karenisha smiled weakly, a grateful gleam in her eyes. "Thank you, Saderia. I appreciate that." Seeing the fiery, worried glint in her daughter's amber irises, she let out a soft sigh and rested her tail calmly on Saderia's shoulder, her gaze clearer with seriousness. "Don't worry about me, Saderia. I'm not going to become the scared animal I was back in the other forest. I'm strong enough to realize that what I did was wrong and get over what happened. It's not your job to look after me anymore. Now it's my job to look after you. And I can tell something's bothering you."

Saderia paused, then managed a hopeful smile. Maybe her mother really was becoming her old, strong self again. "I'm honestly fine, Mom. I mean, the war was kind of scary, but I think I'll be able to get over it in time. It's just..." She trailed off with a tense, wary frown.

Karenisha's eyes softened with sympathy. Slowly, she rested her tail on Saderia's shoulder, her amber gaze warm and comforting. "Yes?"

Saderia let out a sigh and just shook her head. "Nothing. It's just... something happened in the war...that made it kind of hard to talk to Dash now."

Karenisha blinked in confusion. "What happened?"

Saderia just shook her head again and looked away. "Nothing. Never mind. We'll find some way to work it out." She paused, then made herself smile up at her mother. "I'll be fine, I promise. Thanks for coming in here, but I'll be okay." Seeing the worried look in her mother's eyes, she firmly met her gaze. "I promise."

Her mother studied her for a long time, then just nodded with a soft sigh and a weak smile. Taking a deep breath, she slowly pushed herself to her paws and started to pad toward the door, but stopped when she reached it and turned back to face Saderia with a weak, sad smile. "I know you'll be okay, Saderia. But if you ever do need help, you can always talk to me."

By lunchtime the next day, Saderia felt weak with exhaustion. Fighting to keep her eyelids from drooping, she stared down at her tray of food, absently twirling her plastic spoon. Her head hung slumped over the table and her eyelids fluttered with sleepiness. Even when she tried to pay attention to her friends' conversation, she could barely even hear Loki and Lisa's voices. They sounded oddly far away. Blinking several times, she shook herself and tried to force herself to wake up, but it wasn't easy. Last night, her nightmares had seemed to persist for hours, leaving her feeling exhausted in the morning as if she hadn't slept at all. She probably would have been better off if she hadn't. Giving herself a rough shake to try to wake up, she nodded absently at something Loki said, barely hearing a word of the conversation.

Discreetly, Saderia looked to her left where Dash was sitting on the bench of the lunch table beside her. Looking as preoccupied and uneasy as ever, he played absently with his food, his eyes dull and clouded. Seeming to feel her gaze, he looked up out of the corner of his eye and locked eyes with her. Instantly, he froze, while Saderia stiffened. Tension crackled in the air. In a split second, both of them turned away from the other and stared down at their food, their fur bristling with discomfort and their eyes seeking out anything except than each other. Tense with unease, Saderia barely noticed when Loki abruptly stopped talking, but she did notice when Loki suddenly leaned across the lunch table and clapped her paws right in front of Saderia's face. With a sharp gasp, Saderia flinched and snapped her head up to look at her, her eyes wide with surprise.

Loki just shrugged and raised an eyebrow. “Sorry. It looked like you were about to fall asleep in your pudding, and that’s only funny when it happens to animals I don’t like.”

Saderia managed a weak, embarrassed grin. “Sorry, Loki. I guess I’m just not sleeping well.” Out of the corner of her eye, she cast a sideways glance at Dash when she realized he was watching her. He abruptly turned away before she could catch his eye.

Loki glanced back and forth between Saderia and Dash with raised eyebrows for a heartbeat of silence, then abruptly leapt back off the bench and stood up in front of the lunch table. When everyone looked up at her in surprise, she sharply flicked her tail and nodded toward the kitchen at the back of the noisy cafeteria. “You know what, I think they’re serving ice cream today!” Without another word, she leapt right over the lunch table in one quick streak of yellow fur and landed right behind Saderia. When the tiger Princess whipped around in surprise, Loki merely turned around and tapped her lightly with her tail, giving her a faint smile. “Come on, Saderia. I’m going for ice cream, and you’re coming with me. You look like you could use something cold to wake you up.”

Saderia blinked several times, then just shrugged and stepped away from the lunch table with a bewildered frown. “Okay...”

Giving her an encouraging nod, Loki turned and darted away without a word, leaving Saderia no choice but to follow. With wide eyes and a confused frown, Saderia hastily stumbled down the length of the long lunch table after her spotted friend, avoiding the other students hanging around the bench of the table. At a quick pace just below her usual speed, Loki led her toward the long line of students standing in front of the kitchen to wait for their ice cream. Just before they reached the line, though, Loki pulled her closer to the wall of the lunchroom instead, far away from the other students. As soon as they were out of earshot of their own classmates and the other students in the line, Loki narrowed her eyes with a worried frown and coolly met Saderia’s bewildered gaze. “Excuse my uncharacteristic vulturism, but what’s going on with you and Dash?”

Saderia blinked in surprise. “Huh?”

Loki narrowed her eyes. Flattening her ears, she glanced back at the lunch table where Dash, Lisa, and Jeb sat, then slowly turned back to face Saderia with worried green eyes. “I don’t know. It’s just...lately, you two

seem to have this weird...awkwardness about you. Whenever you two look at each other, there's this tension. And the way Dash acts...it's almost like he's wary of you or something. It's like you're both waiting for the other to do something bad. You two used to be so close, and now it seems like you can barely even look at each other anymore. What's going on? Did something happen between you?"

Saderia let out a long, tired sigh and glanced darkly back at the table. She should have known Loki would notice something was wrong. After a long moment of hesitation, she took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Trying to stifle a twinge of guilt and regret, she forced herself to look back up at Loki and gave her a weak smile. "It's nothing for you to worry about, Loki. It's just...it's just a huge misunderstanding, that's all. I don't really want to talk about it right now because it's just...it's really complicated, okay?" When Loki raised an eyebrow, Saderia let out a quiet sigh and looked away, uncomfortably flattening her ears. "Look, let's just say that...during the war...something happened between us that made it a little hard to trust each other, and we're still kind of...working through it."

Loki narrowed her eyes and frowned. For a long moment, she studied her in silence, then simply shrugged and flicked her tail. "All right. Fair enough. Doesn't seem like you're getting much work done, but that's probably none of my business. I'll butt out now. Just know that if you ever need a friend, you can come see me." A knowing gleam shimmered in her bright green eyes. "And if you want my opinion, I don't think there's anything in this world strong enough to tear you and Dash apart. I'm sure you two will find some way to work it out."

Saderia smiled a wry, sad smile. "Nothing in *this* world, that's for sure..."

Loki just shrugged, not catching the bitter tone in her voice. "You two will find a way to get along. I can't imagine a world where you two aren't friends. I mean, the forest will probably just split in half if you two start hating each other."

Saderia rolled her eyes, while Loki just chuckled. With a bright grin, the cheetah gave her a playful flick of her tail and nodded to the lunch line. "Come on, let's go get some ice cream. If you want, we can even get one for Dash and put something gross in it to get revenge. In my line of work,

I've found that it always helps to level the playing field, if you know what I mean."

Saderia couldn't help but laugh and roll her eyes even as her heart skipped at the words. "Thanks, Loki, but I'll pass on that."

After all, revenge was what had gotten them into this mess in the first place.

Chapter Six

Caution

Dash lay on his back staring up at the ceiling with dark amber eyes, his tail twitching restlessly back and forth. A long sigh escaped his throat as moonlight shimmered through the window, lighting up his room and leaving the walls draped in shadows. Pulling the blanket up over his face, he tried to hide, half-hoping he would disappear and wishing that when morning came, Saderia would decide to just leave him behind after school and go to the Home of the Leopards to visit Loki on her own. It was a pointless wish. He doubted that would actually happen, even though Saderia had seemed to avoid him more than normal over the past few days. They hadn't spoken once since the day Saderia and Loki had gone to get ice cream at lunch. In the back of his mind, he wondered if they had said anything about him.

When he hadn't been worrying about his rocky relationship with Saderia, he had noticed something else. Saderia had seemed very tired all throughout the past few days. She blamed it on not sleeping well and he wondered if her nightmares had something to do with that. With all his heart, he wished he could ask her about her nightmares, but he doubted she would tell him. If she wanted to, she would have talked to him already. Besides, he was too afraid to ask in case they had something to do with him.

With a weary sigh, he closed his eyes on the darkness as his thoughts shifted to his upcoming trip to the desert on Saturday. It was one of the many things he really didn't want to do. Once they got there, Saderia would probably just go off with Dingo and ignore him completely. She might even *tell* Dingo what he had done in the war, and then Dingo might do something or say something to make it even worse. Dash's fur bristled and he gritted his teeth in a sudden flash of anger. Even though he would like to believe Saderia wouldn't tell him, he couldn't be sure. But that wasn't even the worst part. Dingo was probably the one Saderia considered her closest friend at the moment. Seeing Dingo again would probably only

remind her of what Dash wasn't. After all, he used to be her best friend—the one she shared everything with and looked forward to seeing—but now he was no longer that animal. Apparently, his role had been passed on to Dingo, and he was really starting to hate him for it.

Dash sighed and buried his face between his paws. Why couldn't he and Saderia just be friends again? He let out a low groan. "I hate you, Dastarius," he muttered into his paws. "If I ever see you again, you'll pay for this."

Without warning, a muffled scream suddenly burst out from the room beside his, raising all the fur along his back. With a muted gasp, Dash instantly shot his head out from underneath the blanket, his eyes wide and his heart skipping with shock. A blast of cold washed over him when he realized the cry had come from Saderia's room. Feeling his breath catch in his throat, he instantly threw the blanket to the side and leapt to the cold floor, his heart beginning to race in his chest. Without thinking, he raced to the shadowy door of his room and threw it open with a loud, moaning creak. As fast as he could, he shot through the small pitch black space of hallway between his room and hers, shoved the door open, and burst into the shadowy room, his eyes wide with panic.

"Saderia?"

Just as his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he skidded to a halt in the doorway of her room, his heart skipping a beat. Saderia sat stiffly upright on her bed, her fur bristling and her eyes wide with terror. At the sound of his frightened voice, she whipped around to face him with a gasp, her amber irises shimmering with fear. Dash's heart skipped at the sight of the terror on her face and he instinctively took a step back. Saderia's eyes bored into him, seeming to see straight past him to something terrifying. Or maybe she was seeing something about him that he couldn't. Every part of her looked tense and terrified. Her eyes were wide, her orange and black-striped fur was tangled and bristling, and her claws shook on her blanket.

Dash's eyes widened in surprise. Blinking several times, he studied her for a long moment, then nervously narrowed his eyes and took a cautious step forward. "S-Saderia? Are you...okay?"

Saderia stared at him with wide eyes, not seeming to comprehend his words. Blinking several times, she watched him blindly for a heartbeat longer, then abruptly shook herself and looked away. Taking a shaky breath,

she lowered her eyes to her rumpled blanket, trying to control her wild, shallow breathing. With a shaky sigh, she looked away from him, avoiding his eyes.

Dash narrowed his eyes with a worried frown, unable to bite back his concern and curiosity. “Saderia? What’s wrong?”

Saderia glanced at him out of the corner of her eye, then slowly looked back down at the ground, a dark shadow creeping across her face. “Nothing...Dash. I’m...I’m fine. Really.”

Dash frowned and eyed her cautiously. “A-Are you sure?”

“Yes,” she snapped, shooting him a cold glance as if warning him away. With a deep scowl and a tense look on her face, she let out a long sigh and shakily pushed her blanket aside. Keeping her eyes locked on the ground, she slowly slid out of her bed. She shivered when her paws touched the cold floor, but never looked up. “Yes, I’m fine.”

Dash hesitated and rocked uneasily on his paws, feeling tense and uncomfortable. Something in her expression told him he should leave, but his paws remained rooted in place. “Did you have another nightmare?” he asked, trying to keep his tone light and calm and act the way he thought he used to, back when they used to talk about things. Maybe it would make her open up more. Dash hesitated, then narrowed his eyes and studied her curiously, daring to hope that they might be able to talk like they used to. “Do you want to talk about it?”

To his dismay, Saderia flattened her ears and darkly shook her head without looking at him. “No,” she muttered. “It’s fine. Let’s just go get something to eat, then go to school.”

Dash’s tail drooped with disappointment. When Saderia started to walk toward him to push past him into the shadowy hallway, he let out a muted sigh and started to turn around to walk away, then paused. With a deep frown, he hesitated in the doorway of Saderia’s room, then whipped back around to face her with narrowed eyes. When she froze just behind him and looked up at him in surprise, he narrowed his eyes with a dark, miserable frown, unable to disguise the pain in his tone. “Why don’t we ever talk about things anymore?”

Saderia froze, her eyes flashing with alarm. With a dark, uneasy frown, she paused and gave him a wary look. “What do you mean?”

Dash blinked in disbelief. “What do I *mean*? We never say two words to each other anymore, Saderia. That’s what I mean.” He shook his head with a miserable frown. “Nothing’s the same anymore. Why can’t we just go back to normal?”

Saderia let out a weary sigh and pressed a paw to her forehead in exasperation. “Because things have changed, Dash. Things *aren’t* the same...”

“Why?” he interrupted, lashing his tail with a challenging scowl. “Because of Dastarius? That’s what all of this is about, isn’t it? It’s just about him, not what I actually did. If it weren’t for him, then things would be normal.”

Saderia narrowed her eyes and tensely flicked her tail, her expression icy cold. “Maybe you’re right and maybe you’re not. Either way, even without *his* role in all of this, a lot of things have changed.”

“Things have changed since the moment I met you. They’re *always* changing. Bad things are *always* happening to us.” He shook his head and scowled, unable to hide the bitterness in his tone. “When we went through the desert and lived in Jeb’s forest, it wasn’t like this. When we were planning the battles in the war, it wasn’t like this. This isn’t about the war or what’s changed. This is about Dastarius. He caused this.”

Saderia let out a long sigh and looked away. “Look, let’s just go get something to eat and get ready for school. We can talk about this some other time.”

“Like when?” Dash demanded, giving her a challenging glare. “We never talk about *anything*, Saderia.”

Saderia just shook her head and looked away without responding. Looking frazzled and disoriented, she pushed past him without a word and stalked out into the dark hallway with stiff steps, her tail lashing tensely back and forth.

Dash gritted his teeth as she shoved past him, his fur bristling with regret and a twinge of anger. Flattening his ears, he whipped around to face her just as she stepped out into the hallway, his eyes narrowed and his heart skipping with distress. “Look, I’m sorry, all right?” Gritting his teeth, he glared after her and sharply lashed his tail. “I don’t know what to say. If I had known what he was planning, I would have never had anything to do with him!”

Saderia stopped just in front of him and hesitated. After a single heartbeat of silence, she looked back over her shoulder and met his gaze with a glint in her eyes that was almost cold. With a deep frown, she slowly turned back around to face him with dark, narrowed eyes and an icy flick of her tail. “How could you have not known?” she hissed, her voice thick with disbelief. When Dash opened his mouth to say something, she quickly held up a paw to stop him. “I’m not saying you should have guessed his whole plot from the very beginning, but you should have at least assumed he was planning *something*. He’s Dastarius. He tried to kill *all of us*. Why would he ever have *any* of our best interests at heart?”

“I didn’t think he did,” Dash protested with a defensive frown. “In the beginning, at least. I mean...I...I only did it...” He trailed off with a sigh of defeat and wearily shook his head. “I don’t know why I did it, Saderia, but I’m sorry. What can I do to prove to you that I’m not some evil monster out to get you?”

“I don’t think you’re like that,” Saderia replied in a voice as stiff and icy as her expression. With flashing amber eyes, she turned around and rose to her paws as calmly as she could to walk away. “We can talk about this later. Right now, we have to go to school. And we are *not* going to talk about it there.”

Dash flattened his ears. “Why? When did appearances become so important to you?” When Saderia turned around and narrowed her eyes at him, he let out a weary, desperate sigh. “Look, why can’t we just talk about this?”

“This is something we have to work through,” Saderia responded, her voice icy calm and her dark eyes warning him against continuing the conversation. “We can’t just...instantly go back to normal. We just...We have to work our way back up to that. We both have to work a bit to try to be friends again.”

“I am trying—”

“No, you’re really not,” Saderia cut him off, cutting her eyes at him with a cold frown.

Dash let out a long sigh and dropped his defensive tone in defeat. “Fine, fair enough. But you aren’t either.”

She simply flicked her tail with an icy calm look. “Fine. Then we’ll both try harder to get back to normal, but like I said, it will be a gradual

thing. Right now, we have to go to school and keep the peace in the forest and spend time with our friends—we have to *act* normal.”

Dash looked away with a weary breath. “Fine. But I don’t see how we’re ever going to get back to normal if we don’t spend any time alone with each other.” He paused, then looked up when his heart skipped with hope. “I mean, maybe we could spend some time together on the weekends if we had those to ourselves, but we seem to always go visit Dingo on those days...Is that...going to happen every weekend?” He looked up to meet Saderia’s gaze with a hopeful smile, but as soon as his eyes met hers, he knew he had said the wrong thing.

Saderia frowned at him. “We already promised Dingo we’d visit him this weekend, and weekends are our only time to visit him. He’s our friend, Dash. What are we supposed to do? Just forget about him now that he’s Leader of the pack?”

Dash scowled and glanced down at his paws with dull, narrowed eyes, biting back a sigh and a twinge of annoyance. “I guess you’re right, Saderia. Never mind. Forget what I said...”

Saderia studied him with narrowed eyes for a long moment, then let out a soft breath and turned around. Coolly flicking her tail, she started to walk away from him down the shadowy hallway with one last murmur in the silence of the night. “Come on, let’s get ready for school. Maybe we can talk later.”

“Tawny’s been bouncing around like crazy ever since Maeta told her she could come with us to go see Bunny on Saturday.” Loki glanced back over her shoulder to look at Saderia with a bright grin and a twinkle in her shining green eyes. The cheetah led the way along a dusty, worn-down path winding through miles of thick bright green woods. Lisa walked along beside her, while Saderia and Dash hurried after them, gazing absently around at the forest. Sunlight shimmered through the tangled, leafy canopy overhead, lighting up the four animals. Leaving the town where the path had started far behind, the four of them padded quickly along the dusty road, heading toward the Home of the Leopards’ clearing at the end of the enormous woods.

Saderia looked up to catch Loki’s eye and smiled. “Really? That’s great.”

Dash glanced up at his three friends out of the corner of his eye and struggled to think of something normal to say. He knew he should try to join in to make things seem more normal, but even when he tried to make himself talk, he felt tongue-tied. The thought of saying anything anymore terrified him. Even if it seemed mundane to him, what if it bothered Saderia? The talk they had had that morning had seemed more like an argument than a conversation. Maybe she would prefer for him to keep his distance for a while. But then would it seem like he wasn't trying?

Biting back a sigh, Dash furiously shook the thoughts from his head and made himself look up, knowing his worries were pointless. Fighting back his fears, he opened his mouth to say something, but never got a chance to utter a word.

Not noticing him, Loki glanced back over her shoulder just as he started to speak, and chuckled. "Yeah, it's really cute. Maeta's looking forward to seeing the dingoes again, too."

Saderia grinned and nodded eagerly. "It's going to be great. I was actually kind of hoping we could spend the night there since I rarely get to see Dingo. Would you guys mind spending the night? If we do end up sleeping there, we could just go back early the next day if you wanted to get back home, or else Dingo could have someone take you, Maeta, and Tawny back to the forest on Saturday while we stay."

Loki shrugged and opened her mouth to reply, but never got the chance.

Before she could say a word, Dash whipped around to face Saderia with wide eyes and blurted out his words before he could think about them. "We're spending the *night*?"

Saderia blinked in surprise and turned to look at him with wide eyes, stunned by his sudden outburst. At the same time, Loki and Lisa glanced back over their shoulders in surprise, their eyes bewildered. Dash blinked several times and froze when he realized all three of them were staring at him. Feeling his fur bristle with discomfort, he glanced around at them with wide eyes, then abruptly looked down and winced, trying to hide behind his mane. Even as his fur prickled with discomfort at their bewildered gazes, his heart skipped with disbelief. Saderia hadn't told him they would be spending the night. He didn't *want* to spend the night!

Saderia stared at him in surprise for a heartbeat of silence, then narrowed her eyes in a bewildered frown and slowly nodded her head as they started walking again. “I had kind of hoped to. If you don’t want to... we don’t have to.” She frowned and tensely flicked her tail, hiding a pang of regret. “I just kind of thought of it now...I thought it was a good idea, but...”

“No, it’s fine,” Dash said quickly, not wanting to upset her...even though it was anything but fine. Swallowing back his dismay, he glanced down at his paws to hide his expression, then cautiously looked back up to meet her eyes. He hesitated, then tipped his head to the side. “If we do spend the night...uh...what time would we leave the next day? Just out of curiosity,” he added, seeing Saderia’s bewildered frown.

Saderia shrugged and uncomfortably studied the woods around her. “Probably sometime in the afternoon or close to nighttime, I guess. Unless Loki and the others want to go back earlier.”

Dash’s heart sank with disappointment and he tasted bitterness in his mouth, but he just nodded and looked away. “Okay...so...*where* exactly would we sleep there?”

Saderia frowned and tensely flicked her tail. “I don’t know. It doesn’t matter. Dingo might have an extra den we can sleep in, or if his den is big enough, he’ll probably let us camp out with him. Or else we can all just sleep out in the open like we used to on our journeys through the desert. I’m sure it’s safe. After all, Dingo said Rock’s old followers hardly ever attack the actual camp, and he posts plenty of guards.”

Dash bit back a sigh and just nodded, avoiding her eyes. “Fine,” he muttered.

Saderia narrowed her eyes in confusion and cast him a long, questioning glance. “Would that be...okay?”

“Yeah,” Dash murmured, keeping his eyes on the ground and not bothering to disguise his lackluster tone of voice. “Yeah, that’d be fine.” No, it would not. Why couldn’t they just leave Dingo alone? He had a whole pack to rule, after all, since he was *so* great. Why did Saderia always have to act like he was all that—like she was just *dying* to see him again? He was only a few hours away!

Saderia frowned and studied Dash with narrowed eyes for a long moment, then slowly turned back to face Loki, her gaze clouded with

bewilderment. Giving herself a quick shake, she looked up at the cheetah and flicked her tail, trying to keep her voice even and unaffected. “Anyway...that’s basically what I was hoping to do—spend the night at Dingo’s camp and then go back sometime the next day. Would that be all right with you?”

“Yeah, that’d be fine.” Loki cast Dash a long glance out of the corner of her eye, then looked back at Saderia and just shrugged, ignoring the tension between them. “Maeta might be a little nervous about letting Tawny spend the night somewhere so different, but I doubt anything will happen to her and I doubt she’ll run away or get lost or anything—she’ll have Bunny to keep her occupied.”

“Dingo will make sure nothing happens to them,” Saderia assured her with a nod and a more serious look. “If it’s necessary, he’ll tell the guards to keep a close eye on Tawny and Bunny, just in case.”

Loki smiled and nodded. “In that case, I think it’ll be fine. I look forward to it.”

Saderia just smiled and nodded back, hiding her lingering unease over Dash’s odd outburst.

Looking up at them out of the corner of his eye, Dash wondered if he should say something similar, but he had never been very good at lying. Besides, he was too busy silently hating Dingo. Why did *he* always get to play the hero? Dingo was the guy who had killed Rock, saved the outcasts from certain death, played an important part in rescuing the forest, and was now dubbed the greatest Leader in history. Meanwhile, Dash was the guy who had almost turned traitor, talked to and plotted with evil dead lions, and probably inadvertently delayed the revolution in the forest by becoming Rock’s Second in Command, even if it had all been an act and a part of the plan. How exactly had all that happened anyway? If anything, couldn’t Dastarius’s plan have *at least* gained him a *tiny* bit of admiration rather than notoriety?

Shaking the thoughts from his head, Dash bit back a sigh and looked up. Before he could wonder how much longer this uncomfortable walk through the woods would go on, his eyes caught on something up ahead. Just past Loki and Lisa at the front of their group, the dusty trail through the woods ended along with the dense undergrowth rising up all around it.

Right before their eyes, the trees fell away and the wide, dusty clearing of the Home of the Leopards spread out before them.

Dozens of tiny wooden houses sat scattered all around the back of the enormous clearing, leaving plenty of space in the middle. Leopards milled around all throughout the clearing. Tons of spotted animals lingered around their houses, chatting with neighbors and laughing at jokes, while others wandered through the wide clearing to visit friends. Their loud, excited voices rose in the crisp morning air. The entire clearing seemed warmed by an air of peace and tranquility.

With a wide smile, Loki stepped off the path and bounded into the center of the dusty clearing with Saderia, Dash, and Lisa close behind her. Saderia's eyes lit up as she followed the cheetah to the middle of the familiar neighborhood. Her heart glowed at the sight of the clearing and the peace that seemed to have settled over it. While the others stopped in the middle of the clearing to look around, Saderia gazed out at the neighborhood with shining amber eyes, searching for familiar faces. She didn't have to look for long.

“Loki! Loki!” In a flash, a tiny spotted orange cub dashed out of the open door of a nearby den, squeaking with excitement. With an eager cry, she darted toward Loki and her friends and skidded to a halt just in front of the cheetah, her wide brown eyes shimmering with enthusiasm. Practically bouncing on her paws, she gazed up at Loki with a bright, excited smile. “Is it time to leave yet? Is it time to see Bunny?”

Loki chuckled and patted the tiny cub on the head. “No, Tawny, you still have to wait one more day. Then you can see Bunny.”

“Oh.” With a disappointed frown, Tawny looked down at the ground for a single second, then hastily looked back up, seeming to forget her sadness. Smiling a bright smile, she bounced up and eagerly rocked on her paws. “Okay! At least I get to see her tomorrow!” Her chocolate brown eyes shimmered with joy. “We’ll have so much fun! We can play tag and hide-and-seek...”

“I’m sure you’ll have a lot of fun,” Loki interrupted, waving a paw to stop her. Her green eyes narrowed with seriousness and she gave the cub a long, firm look. “Just remember, Tawny, when we get to the dingo camp, you’re not allowed to leave it. You could get lost.”

Tawny nodded with the most serious frown she could manage. “Okay, Loki.” She paused, then glanced past the cheetah and bounced up with an excited grin when she saw Saderia and Dash. “Hi, S’Dera!” she chirped in a bright, high-pitched squeal. “Hi, Dash!”

Saderia gave her a warm smile. “Hi, Tawny. Are you excited to see Bunny?”

Tawny nodded with a bright grin. “Yeah! She’s my best friend!”

Saderia smiled back at her, but felt an odd twinge of regret. With a faint frown, she glanced back at Dash out of the corner of her eye and tried not to wince. There had been a time not too long ago when she and Dash had been best friends as happy and carefree as the tiny cub. She tried not to think about it.

Pushing the thoughts away, she glanced back at Tawny and forced a smile back on her face. “That’s great. I’m sure Bunny will be happy to see you, too.”

Tawny giggled. “I know so!” With a wide smile, she looked up at Dash, her short tail flicking wildly back and forth in excitement. “Hi, Dash!”

Dash looked down at the cub and managed a weak smile, trying to hide his chaotic thoughts. “Hi, Tawny.” He hesitated for a moment, then leaned down and gave her a gentle pat on the top of her fuzzy head, keeping his eyes locked on her and trying not to look at Saderia.

Tawny grinned and gazed up at him with shining brown eyes. With a soft giggle, she bounced up and leapt toward Dash when he stepped back. Ignoring his yelp of surprise, she lunged toward his tufted tail and pounced it to the ground with an excited squeal. Dash almost jumped in surprise, then couldn’t help but smile when he caught the playful gleam in the cub’s eyes. Forcing himself to relax, he grinned and lightly flicked his tail away from the cub, then twitched it across the ground. When the cub eagerly lunged after it to pounce it again, he couldn’t help but chuckle to himself.

Loki watched the cub with a warm smile and slowly shook her head. “She has this weird obsession with tails,” she murmured, rolling her eyes. With a faint grin, she glanced up at Dash and raised an eyebrow. “You should probably be careful...”

“Ow!” Dash’s sharp hiss cut Loki off before she could say anything more. With wide eyes, he instantly yanked his tail away when Tawny sank

her claws into it just below the tuft. Jumping at the sting of pain, he immediately tore his tail away and flicked it up to his face to examine it with wide, stunned eyes.

Loki tried to hide a grin. With a sheepish shrug of her shoulders, she met his eyes when he looked up at her, and tried not to laugh. “I was just about to tell you—she knows how to use her claws now.”

Saderia put a paw to her mouth to hide a laugh. Barely noticing her, Dash blinked several times and looked back to stare at Tawny with wide eyes. Not seeming to notice his surprise, the tiny cub bounced eagerly up and down, trying to swat at his tail. Blinking in shock, he stared at the cub for a long moment, then managed a weak smile and shook his head in good humor. “It looks like it.” With a faint shake of his head, he flicked his tail back to the ground to let Tawny chase it again.

Loki snickered and rolled her eyes. “I think Bunny taught her that, so blame her.”

Saderia grinned and shook her head. “That figures.”

Dash rolled his eyes in good humor. “Leave it to a dingo.” The instant the light-hearted words left his mouth, though, he froze, wondering if he had said the wrong thing. Maybe he shouldn’t be so down on the dingoes. After all, even if he didn’t particularly like them anymore, Saderia did, and insulting them probably didn’t help her forget the fact that he seemed to want to avoid visiting Dingo again. Trying not to wince, he bit back a sigh and glanced back down at Tawny. Avoiding Saderia’s eyes, he focused all of his attention on the cub, hoping that if he had said something wrong, Saderia would overlook it.

Saderia glanced at Dash with an uneasy frown, sensing a sudden burst of tension from him. With narrowed eyes, she studied him for a long moment, wondering what was bothering him. After a tense beat of silence, she just shook it off and looked back at Loki, trying not to let her fur prickle with discomfort. “So...now that we’re here, what do you want to do?”

Loki just shrugged and glanced at the woods surrounding her home. “We could go out into the woods and play games like hide-and-seek, if you want. We could go to Hillcrest Rock—that place always has a lot of good hiding spots.”

Saderia smiled. “Okay, that sounds fine.” She paused, then glanced at Dash and nervously flicked her tail at him. “Is...that okay with you,

Dash?”

Dash looked up at her out of the corner of his eye and nodded hastily. “Yeah, that’s fine.”

Saderia just nodded and quickly looked back at Loki. Avoiding Dash’s eyes, she started to say something, then broke off when a stern voice suddenly cut through the chatter rising up around the clearing.

“Tawny! What have I told you about chasing tails?”

Blinking in surprise, Saderia looked up with her friends just in time to see a tall, powerful leopard step toward them from the other side of the clearing. Maeta, the leader of the leopards, hastily walked up to them, her chocolate brown eyes flashing with sternness and concern. Lashing her spotted tail sharply back and forth, she stopped just in front of them and stared down at Tawny with a firm, unwavering frown.

Tawny flattened her ears under her aunt’s harsh gaze and hung her head. “Sorry, Mom, but his tail’s so much fun to chase!”

Maeta let out an exasperated sigh and rolled her eyes. “I realize you enjoy it, Tawny, but it’s not polite—especially when you’re in the company of royalty. Saderia and Dash *are* the Princess and Prince of the forest, and despite the fact that you see them more often than most, you need to treat them with respect.”

Tawny’s tail drooped and she let out a quiet sigh. “Sorry, Mom...”

“It’s okay, Maeta,” Dash said quickly, looking up at the leopard leader and offering her a faint smile. “I don’t mind.”

Maeta just sighed and shook her head. “I appreciate it, Dash, but I’m sure you didn’t come here to be annoyed by her. I’ll take her off your paws.”

Saderia bit back a giggle and just smiled. “She’s not bothering us, but all right, Maeta. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Maeta smiled, her chocolate brown eyes twinkling with excitement. “Right. Thank you for giving us the chance to go with you.” Dipping her head to her, she leaned down and grabbed Tawny by the scruff of her neck. While Tawny grinned and waved goodbye, Maeta just turned to walk back toward their small, wooden den, flicking her tail toward the others in goodbye. In a few quick strides, the leopard leader paced to the den and ducked into the open doorway, disappearing from sight.

Loki chuckled and shook her head as she stared at the place where Tawny and Maeta had disappeared. “That cub’s as playful as ever.”

“That’s for sure.” Saderia grinned, then paused and glanced at the dense woods surrounding the back half of the Home of the Leopards’ clearing—a place she knew well as Twisted Creek Woods. The dark, wild woods held plenty of bad memories from the time the hunters had invaded the forest, but they no longer scared Saderia as much as they used to. Shaking off her doubts, Saderia nodded toward the woods and squeezed up a smile. “Come on. Hillcrest Rock sounds perfect. Let’s go check it out and play some games. Have some fun for once.”

“Here we are!”

At the sound of Loki’s bright call, Saderia pushed past a thick clump of undergrowth and looked up to follow the sound of her voice. Instantly, her breath caught in her throat. Right before her eyes, an enormous dusty brown rock rose up in the heart of the woods. Surrounded by thick, leafy trees and cradled in dense undergrowth, the enormous rock rose up so high in the sky it peeked out over the tops of the tallest trees.

Formed by dozens of huge boulders stacked one on top of the other, the enormous formation was topped by a long, slanted ledge propped up on the other rocks. The enormous ledge rose up into the air to brush the branches of the trees clustered around it. A long, craggy rock path sloped down from the ledge at the top of the huge formation to the very bottom of it where grass grew wild around it. Hillcrest Rock—one of the tallest formations in the forest.

With a faint smile, Saderia stepped out into the small clearing surrounding the enormous formation right behind Loki. The cheetah stepped out just ahead of her and stopped to let her and the others catch up, her shimmering green eyes locked on the rock. Behind Loki and Saderia, Lisa and Dash quickly stumbled out through the thick undergrowth and staggered up beside them. Their eyes grew wide with surprise when they caught sight of the rock. After several minutes of walking through Twisted Creek Woods, they had finally reached it.

Loki’s eyes shimmered with excitement. Licking her lips, she glanced back at her three friends and grinned a wide, playful grin. “I have an idea. Let’s have a race to the top of the rock!”

Saderia rolled her eyes and grinned. “You always try to get us to race you just so you can win!”

“Is it my fault I have talents?” Loki replied with a feigned humble bow. Snickering to herself, she grinned from ear to ear and flicked her tail toward the rock. “I bet I can get there first!” Without another word of warning, she suddenly bolted out ahead of Saderia and darted toward the rock in a wild streak of yellow fur.

Saderia’s eyes widened in surprise. “Hey!” With a playful grin, she instantly raced after her, her heart skipping to life.

Lisa and Dash looked up in surprise, then hastily took off running after them, their eyes wide with shock. Not bothering to look back at them, Saderia shot toward the rock as fast as her paws could carry her, while Loki streaked toward it far ahead of her. As fast as she could, Saderia leapt onto the craggy trail of stone winding up to the top of the formation. With Lisa and Dash following close behind her, she bounded up the steep slope in a quick flash of speed, her heart pounding with excitement.

In a flash, she tore up the side of the steep stone slab and leapt up onto the rocky platform at the top of the formation. The instant her paws touched the craggy ledge hanging out over the woods, she looked up and lashed her tail with a playful sense of frustration. Panting heavily, Lisa and Dash stumbled out onto the platform behind her and instantly stopped to look up and follow her gaze. Saderia rolled her eyes. Just a few paces away from her, Loki stood at the very edge of the huge platform, her tail flicking lightly back and forth and her eyes shimmering with triumph.

A wide grin torn between haughtiness and friendliness tugged at the cheetah’s mouth. “It took you guys long enough to get here!”

Saderia hissed in frustration, but couldn’t wipe the grin off her face. “Cheater! You only got here first because you’re a cheetah!”

Loki just grinned and laughed.

Rolling her eyes, Saderia let out a soft sigh and rose to her paws to walk toward her. With Dash and Lisa close beside her, she padded up to the very edge of the long platform at the top of Hillcrest Rock. Side by side, the four friends sat down on the very edge of the ledge and gazed out at the incredible view of the woods, forests, and neighborhoods before them, their eyes shining in the bright sunlight.

Loki let out a long sigh as she settled back on the edge of the rock.
“I love this place. You can see everything.”

Saderia smiled and nodded. With a quiet breath, she turned to take in the view spreading out before her eyes, then froze. A wave of dizziness suddenly swept over her, making her entire world wobble. Blinking rapidly, she stared down at her paws on the edge of the rock to try to calm herself down just as her vision went blurry. Frantically, she shook her head to try to shake off the haziness in her eyes, then froze when the blurriness cleared. Her breath caught in her throat.

The rocky ledge beneath her paws was no longer a soft, dusty brown. Instead, it was a deep brown so dark it was nearly pitch black. It wasn’t miles of blossoming bright green forest spreading out before her eyes past the edge of the enormous ledge. Now, when she looked up to stare past the edge of the craggy dark brown ledge, all she could see were miles of endless sand stained red with blood. Bloodcurdling screams rang in her ears over a distance, while dozens of blood-streaked canines and forest animals tumbled across the sand, snarling at the tops of their lungs. Even the crisp air felt suddenly thick with the scent of gore.

Saderia’s heart skipped. With a wild gasp, she stumbled away from the edge of the rock as fast as she could, practically tripping over her own paws. Frantically shaking her head, she staggered away from the edge as her vision blurred and the image of the desert vaporized before her eyes. In a flash, the bright green forest surrounding the rock formation flickered back into view, leaving the vision of the bloody desert nothing but a memory.

Her breath caught in her throat. With a shaky gasp, Saderia froze in place, her paws trembling on the light brown stone. Blinking several times, she stared at the edge of the platform for a long time, half-expecting the vision to reappear. As she stared, though, it remained the same. The scent of blood had faded, along with the images of the blood-streaked sand and howling fighters. All she could see was bright, dewy forest land before her eyes. Everything was normal...

“Saderia?”

With a shaky gasp, Saderia almost jumped at the sound of the cautious voice. Feeling her heart skip a beat, she looked up and froze when she saw Loki, Lisa, and Dash standing on either side of her on the long

ledge. All three of them stared back at her over their shoulders in surprise, their eyes wide and bright with concern.

Narrowing her eyes, Loki frowned and tipped her head to the side. “Saderia? Are you okay?”

Saderia blinked in surprise. For a long moment, she stared at her three friends with wide eyes, not comprehending what Loki had said or why they were looking at her so strangely. Shaking herself, she looked down and tried to calm the wild pounding of her heart, feeling her fur prickle with discomfort. Out of the corner of her eye, she glanced at the edge of the ledge and frowned when the scene remained the same. The ledge remained the same dusty color and the wild, dense trees beyond it remained firmly in place, making it impossible to envision the bleak, bloodstained desert. Everything was the way it should be. A deep frown tugged at the corners of her mouth. Was she going insane?

Taking a deep breath, she shook herself one more time and forced herself to look back up at her friends. Catching Loki’s eye and the bewildered gazes of Dash and Lisa, she swallowed back her fear and made herself squeeze up a weak smile even as her heart pounded in her chest. “Uh... Yeah, I’m... I’m fine. I just got a little, uh... dizzy... looking down.”

Loki frowned in bewilderment, then just shrugged and turned to look down at the edge of the rock, as if to see for herself how dizzying it was. While Loki glanced out at the woods before her, Dash narrowed his eyes and flattened his ears. A dark shadow crossed his face. When he caught Saderia looking at him, he promptly looked away. Saderia looked away, too.

Not noticing the tension crackling between them, Loki glanced back at Saderia out of the corner of her eye and lightly flicked her tail. “I guess we are pretty high up in the air here. We can go down if you want.”

“No, I’m fine,” Saderia said hastily, trying to calm her rapidly beating heart. Her fur prickled with annoyance, drowning out the fear lingering in her mind. She had never been afraid of heights before, and she didn’t want to start now. No matter what, she was not going to let her memories of the war and the weird flashbacks they gave her get the better of her. Taking a deep breath, she made herself shake off her fears and stiffly turned to stalk to the edge of the ledge. With an expression as impartial as

she could manage, she stepped up beside Loki and stopped on the edge of the wide platform, doing everything she could not to look down.

Loki studied her closely with a curious frown, then just shrugged and turned to look out at the forest. In a second, Saderia's odd panic attack had been forgotten.

Dash cast Saderia a dark glance out of the corner of his eye, then quickly turned away. He chose to ignore her odd fear and not say anything about it, knowing she must have remembered something from the war. Like the ledge. Like dangling from the ledge. Like dangling from the ledge while Dastarius looked down on her and Dash didn't make a single move to help her. A shiver raced down his spine.

Wincing, he forcefully shook the thoughts out of his head. Struggling to ignore the pounding of his heart and the guilt haunting the back of his mind, he turned to look out at the vast forest before him, trying to focus on the scenery to ignore his troubled thoughts. He should have known better, though. The instant he turned to look out at the forest, his eyes snapped to one specific place off in the distance, as if they had a mind of their own. Before he realized it, he found himself staring at a dark, shadowy clearing in a patch of woods far away from the Home of the Leopards. His old clearing in the woods. The place where he had lived before he had befriended and moved in with Saderia. The place identical to its dreamlike replica where he had visited Dastarius in dreams.

Dash winced and abruptly looked away from the woods. Turning his eyes to his paws, he gritted his teeth and tried not to shiver, hating Dastarius even more than he knew he could. Would he *ever* stop feeling so guilty and uncomfortable? Why did *everything* always end up bringing him right back to his memories of Dastarius when the only thing he wanted was to forget him? What was this—some kind of conspiracy? Biting back a sigh, he frowned and glanced at his friends out of the corner of his eye, hoping that at least one of them would break the tense silence between them. At this point, he was half-tempted to speak up himself, if for nothing else than to clear the air.

“This place is so cool,” Loki murmured after a few tense heartbeats of silence. Seeming not to notice the tension between Saderia and Dash, she gazed out at the forest around her with shimmering green eyes. “It’s so nice and quiet out here. It feels like we have this whole place to ourselves.”

“Yeah, like a secret hideout,” Lisa agreed with a nod and an eager smile.

Saderia managed a faint grin and eagerly flicked her tail. “A secret hideout. That sounds neat. It would be pretty cool to have our own secret place like this—a place only we knew about.”

Loki let out a soft, happy sigh. “That would be pretty sweet, but everyone knows about Hillcrest Rock. Somewhere along the line, someone’s bound to come and bother us.”

Saderia just shrugged and let out a soft breath. “Oh well. It’s still nice right now with just the four of us.”

Dash frowned as she spoke and shot her an uneasy glance. For a moment of silence, he hesitated, then let out a quiet breath and dropped his guard. He might as well try to join in on the conversation. Avoiding them would only make things worse. “A secret hideout *would* be cool. It could be a place just for us and our close friends.”

As soon as the words left his mouth, he froze and tensed. Had he said the right thing? Had he sounded normal? When Dash realized what he was thinking, he almost hissed at himself in frustration. Why should he have to check to make sure he had said the right thing every time he opened his mouth?

“Yeah, that would be nice,” Saderia murmured, casting an uneasy sideways glance at Dash. Even though she tried to smile on the outside, she couldn’t help but worry about whether or not she had said the right thing. Her fur prickled with discomfort and annoyance. She hated the fact that even minor small talk had become such a burden, but she couldn’t wipe her doubts from her mind. Biting her lip, she hesitated for a tense beat of silence, then looked around at her friends and shrugged in the lightest way she could. “Hey, how about we all play a game?”

Loki just shrugged. “Sounds good to me. I’m up for anything. What do you think we should play?” When Saderia and Lisa shrugged, Loki turned around to face Dash and nudged him with her tail. “Any ideas?”

Dash froze when her eyes locked on his, his mind whirling and drawing a blank. Feeling irrationally caught off guard, he struggled to come up with an answer and swore he felt sweat break out on his brow. With an uncomfortable shrug, he looked away and nervously flicked his tail. “Um... Hide-and-seek?” As soon as he spoke the first answer that popped into his

head, he froze and felt his heart skip a beat. What if Saderia thought he had suggested that because he wanted to avoid her?

Saderia glanced at Dash out of the corner of her eye and frowned. Was he trying to avoid her? Shaking the thoughts out of her head, she just nodded and flicked her tail when Loki glanced back at her. "That sounds fine."

"Good." Loki paused and glanced around at her three companions, then grinned. "In that case...not it!"

Lisa's ears instantly pricked up. "Not it!"

"Not it!" Saderia jumped in as fast as she could.

All eyes instantly turned to Dash the moment she had spoken. The second all three of them turned to him, Dash froze in place with wide, stunned eyes, as if not understanding.

Loki snickered and tapped him with her tail. "You're it, Dash!" Before Dash could say a word, the cheetah instantly whipped around and darted across the wide platform to the slanted walkway, shouting out a few quick words over her shoulder. "Count to five hundred! Or at least twenty!"

In a flash, Lisa darted after her and followed the cheetah down the craggy path as fast as she could. When the two animals disappeared below the edge of the rock, Saderia hesitated, then hastily raced after them, trying to pretend like everything was normal. Behind her, Dash just sighed and tensely looked down at his paws to start counting and act like he was normal just like the rest of them.

Saderia cast one quick glance back at Dash, then hastily turned around and darted toward the craggy trail leading down from the huge platform of Hillcrest Rock. As fast as she could, she leapt down onto the path just beside the wide ledge and instantly turned to charge down the rocky trail. As she darted down the path, she looked ahead and realized Loki and Lisa must have already hidden when she saw no one ahead of her. Without thinking, she paused in the middle of the long, winding path down to the ground and looked up at the platform towering above her. Before she realized it, her eyes snapped up to the edge of the long, towering ledge where she could just see the top of Dash's dark brown head. Her heart skipped a beat. Without even knowing why, she suddenly froze in the middle of the path, her eyes growing wide. Her vision flickered and blurred. Her breath caught in her throat.

In a flash, the thick trees surrounding the rock and the wild grasses and bushes rising up below it disappeared. Nothing but miles of endless, blood-streaked sand spread out all around her. Frozen in place just above the sandy ground, Saderia stared up with wide, horrified eyes at the shadowy formation towering above her. An enormous, jagged dark brown ledge towered over her head, casting a dark shadow over the spiky rocks jutting up all around her just below the huge platform. Dash stared down at her over the edge of the rocky ledge, his amber eyes dark and cold. Fear streaked through Saderia like an icy cold burst of lightning. Rock was up there. She knew it. The evil tyrant was waiting up on that platform just above her, just waiting to throw her off the ledge to her death. Dastarius was up there.

Her heart skipped a beat. With a shaky cry, she forced herself to move and instantly darted down the narrow, sloping path leading down the side of Hillcrest Rock, her paws scrabbling on the craggy stone. Her eyes never left the shadowy platform of Rock's den towering just above her even as she struggled to stumble down the pathway without falling. Any minute now, Rock's head would appear over the side of the ledge, his dark brown eyes gleaming with bloodlust and his gory fangs showing in a sneer. Her heart pounded faster at the thought.

"It's not real," she whispered to herself in a shaky voice, never tearing her eyes off the ledge. "It's not real, it's not real. It's just a dream. It's all just a dream..." But how could it be a dream when she was awake?

The flashback was no longer just a brief, fleeting glimpse of the same terrifying memories that haunted her dreams. Now it was vivid. Now it was real. The forest had disappeared, leaving nothing but endless, blood-streaked sand all around her. There was no doubt in her mind. She was in the desert. How could she be anywhere else when there were no trees, no bushes, no grass? How could she be anywhere else when Rock was standing up on that ledge, just waiting to look over and grab her?

"Rock's dead," she whispered with a wild shiver. "You're in the forest, and Rock's dead. Dingo killed him. We saved the forest. It's over." Dingo. Her heart pounded faster and the whole world spun around her. Where was Dingo? Had Rock killed him? Where was he? Why wasn't he there when she needed him?

A wild sob tore out of her throat. Hardly daring to breathe, she tore down the pathway as fast as she could without once looking away from the ledge. Her heart beat faster and faster until she could barely feel a thing. Her mind whirled with wild, panicked thoughts, but the vision around her never wavered. Desperate to get away, she flew down the winding pathway as fast as she could, then felt her breath catch when her front paw slid into nothing but open air. Her eyes went wild. With a shrill scream of terror, she slipped forward with a harsh screech of claws and tumbled right off the edge of the winding path.

Air rushed past her. Feeling her heart stop in her chest, she let out an ear-piercing scream as she flew down through the air. All she could see was the dark brown ledge growing farther and farther away as she fell from the enormous platform to her death below. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a huge lake of blood rise up below her. A second before she hit the ground, her mother's scream rang in her ears as if over a vast distance, while Rock's raucous cackling whispered through the air. Her heart lurched. A bloodcurdling scream tore out of her throat. "No! Don't kill me! I don't want to die!"

With a sharp thud, she smacked down on the ground and rolled onto her back, her breath leaving her in a gasp. Her heart skipped and her vision blurred. Hardly daring to breathe, she lay still on the ground, staring up at the sky with wide, unblinking eyes and gasping wildly for breath. Her whole body felt numb and tense. Even though she hadn't fallen far in reality, she was sure she had died from the enormous drop off the monstrous den she had experienced in her mind.

"Saderia!" A wild gasp sounded right beside her, seeming oddly far away. In a flash, Loki's face appeared just on the right edge of her vision, her green eyes wide with panic and fear. Lisa appeared on her left, her face stunned and shocked. With a cry that seemed to echo out over a distance, the cheetah instantly started to check her over for wounds, but Saderia barely even noticed. Vaguely, she saw their mouths move and realized they were shouting her name, but couldn't hear it. Everything around her seemed to fade away into silence.

With wide, unblinking eyes, Saderia stared up at the sky, her vision a blur of blood and battles and barren sand. Her eyes rolled up to the platform towering above her and her heart stopped when a dark brown

figure leaned over the edge of the ledge to stare down at her. His wide amber eyes met hers, gleaming with alarm and terror. He shouted something at her, but she couldn't hear it. All she could do was stare up at him as fear shot through every inch of her numb body. Every part of her felt cold with terror until she could barely breathe.

Visions flashed through her mind and words echoed in her ears, making the entire world blur around her. The ledge. Rock. The battle. The fight on top of the platform. Dangling. Falling. The pool of blood below her. "Hello again, Princess...Kill her!" Dastarius. Dash. "Don't kill me!" Dingo. "Don't kill him!" Karenisha. "You'll pay for what you did to my mother!"

With a wild gasp, Saderia took in a deep gulp of air, trying to force herself to breathe again. Frantically, she squeezed her eyes shut as tight as she could, desperately trying to return to reality. When she opened her eyes again, every part of her tensed and a strangled gasp left her throat. For a second, all she could see was Dastarius's ghostly face hovering above her, his amber eyes leering down into hers and his teeth flashing in an eerie sneer. Just as soon as the vision flashed before her eyes, it faded away, revealing nothing but calm, peaceful forest all around her. The barren, bloodstained desert had faded away, leaving nothing but grass and trees with no blood, no fighting, no desert, and no Rock. Everything was unchanged, exactly the way it was supposed to be.

Blinking several times, Saderia took a deep, shaky breath, forcing air into her lungs. Dimly aware of Loki and Lisa's alarmed, bewildered stares, she slowly stumbled to her paws, lost in a daze. Barely hearing their confused questions, she looked up at the path at the bottom of the enormous rock formation just in time to see Dash leap off the trail. When her eyes snapped to his, he froze on the grass just a few feet away from her, his amber eyes wide with alarm and his fur bristling with worry. Every part of him tensed when she looked up at him, but his eyes never left hers.

Taking a shaky breath, Saderia stared at Dash for a long moment, then slowly looked away. With a trembling breath, she slowly turned around to look at Loki, finally realizing she was there. The instant she turned to face her, she found herself staring into the cheetah's wide, worried green eyes.

“Saderia?” Loki tipped her head to the side and frowned, her expression tense and bewildered. “Are you...okay?”

Saderia blinked several times, then slowly stared down at the ground. The land below her was covered in grass, leaves, and twigs, just the way she had left it...normal. Slowly, she lifted her eyes to the sky. It was light blue, cloudy...normal. Thick woods stretched out all around her, filled with hundreds of trees and bushes and the soft sounds of smaller animals...normal. Everything was normal. Nothing had changed. It had all been in her head.

Slowly, she turned back around to look at Loki with wide eyes, still trying to calm her pounding heart. Maybe she really was going insane. Taking a shaky breath, she faced her friend tensely and struggled for words. “I...I’m fine,” she stammered after a tense moment of silence. “I...I guess I just fell off the edge of the path, and it just...it just scared me a bit...that’s all...” She paused, then glanced up at the top of the ledge and tried to hide a shiver. “I don’t...know what came over me. I’m sorry, Loki. I...”

“Maybe you should go home and rest for a while,” Loki interrupted, holding up a paw to stop her and studying her with tense, worried eyes. “You’ve been acting a little strange lately, and I’m worried.”

Saderia hesitated, then just nodded numbly, too caught up in her thoughts to really think about it. “Maybe you’re right. I’m sorry...”

“It’s fine,” Loki interrupted, resting her tail gently on Saderia’s shoulder and giving her a firm look. “I understand.” She paused, then glanced over her shoulder at Dash and nodded to him to gesture for him to come closer. “Dash, take Saderia home and make sure she gets some rest!” When Dash hesitated then reluctantly crept closer, Loki turned around to face Saderia. A weak smile crossed her face and she lightly patted her shoulder. “You get some sleep, Saderia, and be careful. I don’t want you to get hurt.” She paused, then frowned uncertainly. “If you need to, we can cancel the trip tomorrow...”

“No!” Instantly, Saderia whipped around to face her with wide eyes, her fur bristling with panic and her heart skipping a beat. If there was one thing she needed, it was to talk to Dingo. When Loki blinked in surprise and just shrugged, Saderia let out a long, weary sigh. Looking away from her friend’s curious face, she stared down at the ground and took a deep

breath. “I...I’ll be fine. I guess I do just need some rest. I’ve been missing a lot of that lately...”

Neither Saderia nor Dash said a single word to each other the entire trip back to their house. Side by side, they padded down the shadowy dirt path winding through the thick woods beyond the clearing housing their home. Darkness had already begun to creep over the forest, leaving the dense trees and thick undergrowth cropping up on either side of the path draped in shadows.

Wordlessly, the two padded down the dusty trail without meeting each other’s eyes. Every once in a while, Dash would look at Saderia and watch as she padded along the path, her eyes staring absently out at the land ahead of her without seeing it, blank. It was obvious that whatever had spooked her so badly at Hillcrest Rock still terrified her. As Dash padded along beside her and studied her numb expression, he began to realize what it could have been.

He distinctly remembered hearing her scream cut through the air right after he had closed his eyes to count. Stunned, he had raced to the edge of the platform to see what had happened to her, fearing the worst. His heart had nearly stopped when he had seen her lying on the ground below Hillcrest Rock, surrounded by her two terrified friends. Even that wasn’t the worst part, though. When she had looked at him, the look in her eyes—a gleam that could only be described as pure terror—had been the worst part. Because it wasn’t the fall that had left that fear in her eyes. It was him.

Dash had already guessed that when Saderia had jumped away from the edge of the platform, it had been because it had reminded her of the platform jutting out of Rock’s den—the one she had nearly fallen from. What if she had been reminded of the terror she had experienced dangling from Rock’s den again when she had fallen? Was that *why* she had fallen? And when she had looked up at him from the ground with that terrified glint in her eyes, had she thought he would hurt her—the same thing she must have thought hanging from Rock’s den? Had she thought Dastarius was still manipulating him?

Suppressing a shiver, Dash glanced at Saderia out of the corner of his eye, then instantly looked down at the ground, trying not to wince.

Every day, it seemed more and more obvious that Saderia didn't trust him. And he was beginning to think she never would.

Several moments of tense, awkward silence passed between them as they padded along the dirt path. For a long moment, Dash kept his eyes on the ground and didn't speak, but with each passing second, the silence seemed to grow thicker. After several long beats of nothing but thick quiet, he couldn't take it anymore. With a long, weary sigh, he raised his head to look at Saderia and narrowed his eyes. Before he could think about what he was saying, he had already blurted out the words. "You were afraid because of me. Weren't you?"

Saderia blinked several times, as if coming out a daze, and looked back at him in surprise. "What?"

Dash stopped in the middle of the path and turned to face her. When she stopped in front of him and stared back at him with bewildered eyes, he scowled and narrowed his eyes in a glare. "When you were lying there on the ground after you fell...you looked up at me and you looked...terrified. That's because you were terrified of *me*." Slowly, he shook his head, unable to keep the disbelief out of his voice. "You really don't trust me."

Saderia's eyes widened in alarm. "Dash..." She froze, searching for the right words, and frantically shook her head, her eyes bright with horror and surprise. "I...What happened...with me falling and all of that...it's not because of you!"

Dash's mind raced. Without even realizing it, he gritted his teeth and sharply lashed his tail, feeling an irrational surge of panic and anger. "Yes, it is!" Shaking his head, he squeezed his eyes shut and spoke in a quick, frantic voice before he even realized he was talking. "Look, I'm sorry, okay? I know I shouldn't have listened to Dastarius, but...it just...it just happened!"

Saderia blinked in surprise, then slowly narrowed her eyes, a dark shadow creeping across her face. "And how did it 'just happen'?" She scowled and tensely lashed her tail. "He almost wiped out my entire family—and you, too—and then he comes along in a dream one day and suddenly he's father of the year?"

"I don't know how it happened!" Dash gritted his teeth and wildly lashed his tail, his heart beating faster with dismay. "I don't know what I was thinking! I only did it to try to help you!"

Saderia gaped at him in disbelief. “How would talking to Dastarius ever help me? He hates me! He wants to *kill* me!”

“I just...He told me he was trying to warn me of some danger or something...” Dash frantically shook his head, struggling to find the words to explain. “I just...I was afraid of what might happen to us. To *you*. I only started meeting with him so he’d tell me more about this...danger he came to warn me about. So I could find some way to protect you.”

“Dash, you didn’t *need* Dastarius’s ‘help’ to protect me.” Saderia practically rolled her eyes, her voice dripping with exasperation behind her distress. “We had my Dreams, Dingo’s guidance, and Claw’s insight to guide us and warn us about any problems we might have encountered.”

Dash flattened his ears and cut his eyes at her. “Yeah, well, in case you hadn’t noticed, Claw isn’t exactly the best source of information...”

Saderia gaped at him in incredulity. “You conspired with Dastarius—the guy who tried to kill me, you, and everyone—for weeks, and you can’t even trust *Claw*?!”

Dash narrowed his eyes and looked away. “It’s not that I don’t trust her exactly...”

“Then what is it?” Saderia shook her head in disbelief, her expression torn between shock and annoyance. “I don’t get you, Dash. You have no problem trusting *Dastarius*, of all animals, but at one tiny mention of Claw...I mean...” She put a paw to her forehead in exasperation, as if unable to even find the words to describe what she meant. “You told me once that you didn’t trust Claw because she didn’t visit me for six months back in Jeb’s forest when I thought Dingo was dead. You said you didn’t like her because those six months could have destroyed me and her visit could have helped. But you know what could have destroyed me in less than six months? *Dastarius*!”

Dash scowled and sharply lashed his tail. “Look, that’s not the point. It’s just...I mean...” He let out a long sigh and flattened his ears, giving her a long, dry glare and not bothering to hide the annoyance in his voice. “Just admit it, Saderia, Claw’s not the best source of information.”

“What does that even mean?” Saderia demanded, gritting her teeth and narrowing her eyes in a fiery glare. “She can see everything in the desert *and* the forest—probably at the same time! I can’t think of a better source of information!”

“But she kept things from you—”

“And Dastarius *didn’t* keep things from you?”

Dash heaved a sigh and narrowed his eyes, unable to hide a scowl at her disbelieving tone. “That’s not the point either. Just listen for a minute, Saderia. You have to admit—whether you like it or not—that no matter what Dastarius was secretly planning, he *did* help.” Before Saderia could protest, he lashed his tail and quickly spoke up to cut her off. “Think about it! He’s the one who came up with the whole plan to infiltrate Rock’s camp, put me in a position of power there to gain his trust, and all of that. He pretty much orchestrated the entire plan. He’s the reason we won—the reason why we’re alive and free now, instead of dead or enslaved by Rock. Claw couldn’t have come up with that plan! Neither of us could have even come up with that plan! Who else but Dastarius could have come up with that plan?”

“So just because Claw isn’t a *plotter*, I should just drop her as a friend and a source of information?” Saderia shook her head and curled her lip in disgust. “That’s ridiculous! And we *could* have found *some* way to stop Rock! If it wasn’t Dastarius’s way, it would have been something else! We’re not helpless, Dash. And guess what? I’ve got news for you. In case you haven’t figured it out by now, Dastarius only gave us that plan to put you in a place of power—as Second in Command of the desert—so that you’d have an easier time taking over the forest—and probably the desert, too—after you killed me and the rest of my family! That’s the only reason he used that plan, and it was just good luck that it happened to coincide with our current crisis. I’m sure if he hadn’t intervened, we would have found some way to rescue Mom and stop Rock.”

Dash winced at her harsh words. ...*after you killed me and the rest of my family...* A shiver raced down his spine, but he forced himself to shake off the icy horror, unwilling to give up so easily. Narrowing his eyes and shaking off his unease, he faced Saderia with a deep scowl and flattened his ears. “I’ve already figured that out, Saderia. But no matter what reason he had for using that plan, it still *worked*. Karenisha’s still alive, Dingo’s still alive, I’m still alive, almost all of the forest animals and Dingo’s pack members are still alive, and most importantly, *you’re* still alive. I’d say it worked out pretty well in our favor.” Before Saderia could protest, Dash held up a paw to stop her. “But all right, fine. I’ll drop this

argument. Whether he helped us or not is debatable, but what about in the desert?"

"What about *what* in the desert?" Saderia snapped.

"Remember when we were camping out with the old outcasts—with Thunder and his group of exiled dingoes, back when he was Leader of the outcasts? Remember how Rock and his dingoes attacked Thunder's camp and we got split up?" When Saderia stiffened at the memory, he narrowed his eyes and lowered his tone to a darker, more serious growl, determined to make her understand. "I only lived through that because of Dastarius. You, Dingo, and Jeb ended up together. I ended up alone. When I was alone, Dastarius tried to help me find my way back to you. He led me through the desert to find you. And remember how when you did find me, I was covered in blood and two steps away from death? Remember how I told you I was attacked by six dingoes and you were surprised I survived? I only lived to tell that tale because Dastarius told me how to fight those dogs and led me out of there when I got a chance. No matter what he did or what he planned, if he hadn't been there, I would be dead, Saderia."

Saderia narrowed her eyes and studied him with a dark, unreadable scowl. For a long moment, she stared at him without saying a word, then just shook her head and looked away with a long, heavy sigh. "You know what, Dash, it doesn't even matter anymore. Let's just drop it. I don't want to argue about this."

"Yes, it does matter!" Dash protested, his fur bristling and his eyes widening with disbelief. "If it didn't matter, you would trust me again and you wouldn't always be so upset around me!"

"Look, I'm sorry, but it's a little hard to trust you now, and I can't help that I feel that way!" Saderia exclaimed, lashing her tail and gritting her teeth as if to force herself not to flinch. "I mean...if Dastarius could convince you to believe him so easily one time, who's to say he couldn't do it again?" When Dash opened his mouth to protest, Saderia narrowed her eyes and cut him off with a growl. "Don't say he couldn't because you 'know better now.' You knew better the first time. You knew he was nothing but trouble and that he only wanted to hurt me, and yet you still met with him. What's so different now, after he's done essentially the same thing that he did in the very beginning—try to hurt me and my family? Who's to say that even if you wouldn't listen to him if he came to visit you

right now that you wouldn't listen to him in...oh, say another few months or so? No matter what he did, no matter who he helped or hurt, it doesn't even matter. It doesn't matter what you did as a result of being tricked by him. What matters is that you were *able* to be tricked by him. I thought you had the good sense to not listen to him, but apparently, you don't. And now you're not even you anymore."

Dash narrowed his eyes in a scowl. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means you were never this mean before." Saderia narrowed her eyes and glared at him with undisguised hostility and regret, her tail lashing tensely across the ground. "Dash, I never told you about some of my other Dreams during the war. Here's a common theme—in a lot of my last Dreams, you were shadowed and hard to make out. You probably don't know what that means, so I'll explain with an example. When I first started having Dreams about Dingo—before I ever saw his face or knew who he was—he was shadowed. Because I didn't know him. The fact that you were nothing but a shadow in my Dreams means the same thing. It means I no longer know who you are."

When Dash's eyes widened in shock, Saderia gritted her teeth and spoke up in a low, tense growl that hid the wavering of her voice. "I know how Dastarius works, Dash. I was tricked by him once, too. He gets into your head and messes with your mind before you even realize he's doing it. I know what it's like. That's what he does. And when you were meeting with him, he did something to you to change who you were from the inside out in an attempt to control you. You're different from the Dash I knew before, even if the changes aren't easy to see. Just like in my Dreams, Dash, I don't know who you are anymore, and I don't think you do either. I can't trust you because I don't know you, and I can't trust your judgment either. Not anymore. I can no longer have faith in you to make the right decisions." Her voice quavered and she blinked several times, fighting back tears. "Do you understand now?"

Before he could respond, she whipped around and shot off along the long dirt path as fast as she could, feeling her eyes burn with tears. All she wanted to do was get home before she broke down in front of him.

Dash's eyes widened in surprise. With a yelp of alarm, he instantly raced after her, his heart skipping a beat and his blood running cold with

panic. “Saderia, wait! I...I can change! I can be who I was before! Really!”

Saderia skidded to an abrupt halt and whipped around to face him, gritting her teeth and struggling not to cry. “Then maybe you should work on that on your own for a while. And while you’re at it, why not try thinking of this—try thinking of what it would feel like to be dangling over nothing but bloody battleground on the edge of the den of the tyrant who kidnapped your mother and was dead set on destroying everything you love, all the while wondering if the last two animals you will ever see before you die are your worst enemy and an animal who you thought you could depend on for anything but now can’t trust to do just one thing to save your life. Try thinking of what it would feel like to be beside that animal almost every single hour of every single day and to subconsciously wonder every time you look at them, ‘If my life were in danger, would they stand by me and help...or turn their back and *run*?’” Blinking to fight back tears, she shook her head and cast Dash one last look through blurry eyes before she turned to run away. “Then maybe you’ll understand how I feel.”

Chapter Seven

Hostility

Dash lay on his back across the rumpled blankets, staring up at the blank ceiling above his bed with dull, listless eyes. Broken sunlight flickered across the bed in splashes of light interrupted by the trembling leaves outside his window. With narrowed, unfocused eyes, he stared up at the nothingness above him without once blinking or moving, barely noticing the light creeping into his room. Briefly, he wondered if Saderia had woken up yet, but he promptly pushed the thought away. He didn't want to think about Saderia anymore. He had already stayed up most of the night doing that. No matter how hard he had tried, he hadn't been able to get Saderia's words out of his head. Even now when the sun had begun to rise, they refused to disappear from his mind. By that point, he was sick of thinking about them.

Letting out a weary sigh, Dash flicked his eyes to the dusty window on the other side of his room. Past the glass window, the bright yellow sun had already started to rise up beyond the treetops in the woods outside his house, casting sleepy yellow light out over the forest and signaling the start of morning. Pretty soon, Saderia would wake up and start out on her journey to the desert to meet with Dingo. In the back of his mind, Dash thought he should probably feel something about that, but he couldn't quite muster up the energy to care about the desert anymore. All he felt was a slight twinge of annoyance that faded away as soon as it had come. Before he could even try to make himself feel something, he found himself staring back up at the ceiling, his mind still locked on Saderia's tense words.

She really didn't trust him. Until now, Dash hadn't realized just how much the whole ordeal had hurt her, but now it was starting to make more sense...and more pain. Had she really meant what she had said? That almost every waking moment—every time she was around him—she wondered if he would turn on her? That she no longer trusted him with her life anymore? Was that truly what she had been thinking all this time?

Dash's heart ached with pain at the thought. Before this mess had happened, he and Saderia had been so close. He had trusted her with his life, and she had done the same—and they had proved plenty of times *why* they held that trust. Now it seemed neither he nor Saderia could count on each other for anything.

Dash's mind whirled with everything she had told him. What *would* it have been like to be in her position? Her life had been in severe danger on top of that ledge. What would it have been like to be hanging there so defenselessly, just seconds away from death, and to suddenly see the one animal he feared more than any appear right in front of him to gloat? What would it have been like to see his best friend hesitate to save him? He had only hesitated because if he had tried to save her right away, Rock would have thrown *both* of them off the ledge. As it was, the only reason he had even gotten a chance to pull her up at all was because Dingo had attacked Rock and distracted him. He had tried to explain that to Saderia before, but he still didn't know if she understood.

With a weary breath, Dash forcefully shook the thoughts from his head and tried to focus on something else. After spending an entire night playing the same thoughts over and over again in his mind, he didn't want to think about his destroyed relationship with Saderia anymore. Unfortunately, there wasn't much else to think about other than his impending trip to the desert. That wasn't much better to think about. Almost as soon as the thought crossed his mind, a burning sense of resentment flared in his chest. Why did they have to go to the desert? More importantly, why did they have to spend the night? Dash didn't want to deal with two whole days of sitting back like a fool, watching helplessly as Dingo took his place as Saderia's best friend. He didn't think he had the patience to endure it anymore. It seemed the closer Saderia got to Dingo, the farther she got from Dash.

Why did Saderia have to like him so much? Why did Dingo have to be so annoyingly perfect? Dash flicked his tail irritably across the bed and dug his claws deep into the blanket, seething with anger. *He* used to be the one to save the day, but Dingo had completely stolen that job. Not only had he stolen it, but he had the nerve to do it *better*. After all his exaggerated heroics—fighting Rock, becoming Leader, saving the outcasts—and even all the crazy stuff he had done before the war—rescuing him and Saderia

from the dingoes and fighting Bone—Dash's accomplishments seemed to pale in comparison. He hated that.

And why *did* everybody think he was such a hero anyway? Sure, he had done some good things, but he had done some really bad things, too. Everybody always seemed to forget he was a *murderer*. He had killed two dingoes! Of course, those two dogs had been kind of evil...and had more or less made it clear that they were out to kill everyone they could get their paws on, including everyone Dingo held dear...but still! Either way, he had still *killed* them. Dash hadn't done anything even half as bad as that! Why couldn't everyone just forget all his bad deeds the same way they did for Dingo? Why was Dingo forgiven when Dash wasn't? It just wasn't fair!

Lashing his tail and gritting his teeth in fury, Dash let out a long, grudging sigh and tried to push the thoughts out of his head. With a weary breath, he reluctantly kicked the blankets away and rolled off the bed onto the shadowy floor, trying to ignore the annoyance still burning in his heart. Saderia would be waking up soon, and it would be best if he kept his anger hidden. After all, at that point, there wasn't much he could do besides get over it...

Biting back another sigh, he padded wearily toward his door and pushed it open a crack, letting the sunlight in his room flicker out into the darkened hallway. Practically dragging his feet across the floor, he crept out into the hallway and turned to face the door to Saderia's room, then froze when a muted shriek suddenly split through the quiet morning air. His heart skipped a beat. Blinking several times, he snapped his head up to look at the door with eyes wide with surprise. For half a second, he hesitated at the back of the shadowy hallway, then lurched toward the door as fast as he could. Feeling his heart beat faster, he pushed open the door to Saderia's room and stepped inside, his gaze instantly snapping to her bed. When his eyes adjusted to the darkness, his heart skipped and his eyes widened in surprise.

Saderia sat stiffly upright in her bed, her wide eyes locked on the wall opposite her. All of her fur stood on end or stuck up in thick, matted clumps. Fear shimmered in her wide amber eyes behind the dull sense of lifelessness clouding them. Hardly noticing his entrance, she stared dully at the wall in front of her without blinking, seeming to see through it to something else entirely. She didn't once move.

Dash blinked several times in surprise. With an uneasy frown, he pushed the door open wider and stepped farther into Saderia's shadowy blue bedroom, his heart beating faster with concern. Feeling uneasy and out of place, he hesitated in the doorway, then nervously took a step closer to her bed and forced himself to speak up in a tense whisper. "Saderia?"

At the sound of his voice, Saderia almost jumped. Blinking out of her haze, she whipped around to face him, then froze when she saw him. Slowly, she narrowed her eyes, seeming to relax when she realized who it was. Even so, her shoulders remained tense with discomfort. A deep frown crossed her face. Letting out a weary sigh, she slowly looked away from him and frowned. "Oh...Hi, Dash..."

Feeling a sting in his heart at her cool tone, Dash hesitated, then narrowed his eyes in concern. "Are you...okay?"

Saderia let out a long sigh and nodded quickly. "Yes, I'm fine. I just..." She trailed off and paused with a tense frown, then briskly shook her head. Taking a deep breath, she quickly pushed back her blanket and slipped down onto the carpet, shaking herself as if to wake herself up. Her eyes locked on the floor and never once flicked to him. "Let's just get ready to go to the desert. I want to talk to Dingo."

Dash's fur prickled with resentment, but he hid a tense frown. Cautiously, he took a step closer and spoke up in a soft, hopeful murmur. "You...You can always talk to me..."

Saderia glanced at him out of the corner of her eye, then abruptly looked away. With a dull sigh, she turned her eyes to the ground and just shook her head. "Come on, let's get ready," she repeated. "I want to talk to Dingo."

The silence of the morning seemed thicker than ever. Without a sound, Saderia led the way through the dense forest with Dash following silently behind her. Neither of them said a word. Trying to ignore Dash and shake off the lingering fear of last night's nightmares, Saderia stumbled through the thick bushes and wove around the enormous trees clustered around her. With every step she took, the wild grass seemed to grow thinner and thinner until it just barely tickled her paws. Slowly, the trees started to grow farther and farther apart and the bushes became scarcer and less thick. Knowing the forest border wasn't far away, she hastily stumbled through

the bushes and darted past the trees, wanting to get there as fast as she could.

Every once in a while, she glanced back over her shoulder at Dash to see him trailing slowly behind her, his eyes focused tensely on the ground. Even when she tried to move faster, he seemed to move at the same sluggish pace and never once dared to look at her. His eyes had remained locked on the ground throughout the entire trip.

A weary sigh escaped Saderia's throat as she slowly turned back around to face the dense forest ahead, trying not to wince. Every time she looked back at Dash, she couldn't help but feel guilty for being so cold to him, but she could never find the words to apologize. It was too hard to think of saying sorry when she still felt so uneasy around him. Not to mention, it was difficult for her to even focus on Dash and his feelings anymore. All of her thoughts were taken up by worries about her eerie nightmares and strange flashbacks. Nothing else even registered in her mind anymore. As far as she was concerned, the only thing that mattered anymore was talking to Dingo, one of the few animals she felt comfortable being around and speaking to. At that point, he was probably the only one who could possibly understand and help her.

Shaking the thoughts out of her head, Saderia glanced back over her shoulder, but avoided looking at Dash. Even though her home was miles away and invisible past the thick trees in the woods behind her, she looked back in the direction that would lead her back to her house and couldn't help but smile. Earlier that day when she had gone to convince her parents to let her leave, Karenisha and Makero had easily let her go. Even though she had still seemed nervous about letting her and Dash go off alone, Karenisha had seemed to have recovered from most of her shock and fearfulness and had easily agreed to let them leave. When Saderia had assured her that Maeta and Loki would be going with them and that Dingo would meet them, both she and Makero had seemed relieved. It seemed both of their fears were slowly starting to fade away.

Smiling to herself, Saderia turned to gaze out at the land ahead of her, feeling a twinge of hope and excitement. All around her, the dense woods slowly grew thinner and thinner, leaving only a few trees left between her and the border she knew was waiting just up ahead. Excitement kindled in her chest. Despite her stress, she was eager to see Maeta, Loki,

Tawny, and especially Dingo, as well as whatever pack members he brought with him to lead them to the camp. His older brother, Rip, was sure to be with him, and he was usually good for a laugh. Hope glowed in her chest at the thought of meeting all of her friends. Everything was going to be just fine. Maeta, Loki, and Tawny would have a good time visiting their old dingo friends, and after she and Dingo talked about what was bothering her and worked it out together, she could join in the fun, as well. Everything would be fine.

With a renewed spring in her step, she lifted her head up and looked around with bright eyes. Her gaze flicked up to the horizon just as she wound around a thick clump of trees. The instant she slipped past the dense wall of foliage and undergrowth, the trees suddenly fell away around her. A few remaining feet of thin, sparse grass speckled the ground before her, while the trees and bushes seemed to retreat behind her. Just beyond the last thin stretch of grass, the green stalks turned to light brown sand. Right before her eyes, the desert opened up and spread out in all directions as far as the eye could see. A faint smile crossed her face. She had reached the border.

Grinning to herself, Saderia stepped up to the edge of the grass and stopped to look around just as Dash slunk up behind her. The instant she turned, her eyes caught on a flicker of yellow not far away from her. In a flash, she turned to face the color and smiled. Just a few paces away from her, Maeta and Loki sat on the grass, gazing out at the border with shining brown and green eyes. Tawny sat between them, wriggling in place. When the three animals caught sight of Saderia, they each smiled bright smiles. Gesturing for the cub to follow, Maeta and Loki instantly turned to step closer to Saderia and Dash and stopped when they stood just in front of them, meeting them on the border of the forest.

A bright grin crossed Loki's face. With an eager twinkle in her bright green eyes, she stopped in front of Saderia and happily flicked her tail. "Hey, Saderia! Good to see you." She paused, then tipped her head to the side with a sheepish smile. "You're feeling better, right?"

Saderia nodded quickly and managed a smile. "Hi, Loki. Yes, I'm fine. It's good to see you, too."

Loki grinned. "That's good." She paused, then glanced around and raised an eyebrow. "So Jeb's not here, huh?"

Saderia let out a sigh and shook her head. “No, he couldn’t come. I asked him a few days ago, but he couldn’t make it because his parents didn’t want him to leave again. I guess they don’t want him getting used to leaving the forest after...well, after everything that’s happened lately.”

Loki just shrugged. “I guess I can understand that. Oh, well. I’m sure you guys will tell him how it went when you get home.”

Saderia nodded, then glanced past her, her eyes drawn to the tiny cub sitting close beside Maeta a few steps away from her. With wide, eager eyes, Tawny bounced up and down on the sparse grass, her tail flicking wildly back and forth and her fur bristling with excitement. Barely containing her shrill, eager squeals, the leopard cub batted excitedly at sprigs of grass and bounced across the ground, talking nonstop in a high-pitched voice about everything she and Bunny would do when she reached the dingo camp. Her aunt, Maeta, the animal Tawny thought of as her mother, watched her with a warm smile. As if feeling Saderia’s eyes on her, the cub bounced around to face her and grinned with shimmering brown eyes. “Hi, S’Dera! Hi, Dash!”

Saderia smiled and waved at the tiny cub. “Hi, Tawny. Excited about the trip?”

Tawny nodded wildly and bounced eagerly up and down. “Uh huh!”

“Tawny, what do you say?” Maeta prompted, giving her niece a gentle flick of her tail.

Tawny beamed up at Saderia and happily flicked her tail. “Thank you for letting me come with you, Princess S’Dera and Prince Dash.”

Saderia couldn’t help but grin at the excitement in the cub’s shining brown eyes. “You’re welcome.” While Dash nodded at the cub and squeezed up a faint smile, Tawny just grinned and turned back to her aunt, picking up talking where she had left off in her high, excited voice. With a bright smile, Saderia watched her for a moment, then turned to gaze out at the vast desert before her, letting out a soft, hopeful breath. “I wonder where Dingo and the others are...”

She didn’t have to wonder long. The instant the words left her mouth, a loud, echoing howl suddenly rose up from the endless stretch of sand. In a flash, a lanky brown canine leapt to the top of a distant sand dune, his shaggy fur dark against the shining light of the sun. With a lingering, friendly howl, the canine lunged down the side of the dune and

took off running toward the border as fast as he could, his light brown eyes gleaming in the sunlight. Dingo. Just as soon as he charged down the dune, three other dingoes leapt up behind him with bright, welcoming howls of their own. With sunlight shining down on their red, orange, and yellow fur, the three canines chased after Dingo, keeping their heads up and letting out wild, echoing howls. When the three of them drew closer, Saderia recognized Rip, Tear, and Lightning. In one big group with Dingo at the lead, the four of them flew down the side of the dune in the yellow glow of the sun and raced toward the border, leaving clouds of sand behind them. Saderia's heart lifted and her eyes lit up with joy.

While the others looked up and beamed at the four canines, Dash turned to face the raucous noises and narrowed his eyes in a half-hearted glare. Of course Dingo had to make a whole procession out of it. When the four dingoes bounded over the last dune between them and skidded to an abrupt halt just on the edge of the border, Dash tried to keep out of their sight. Maybe if he didn't speak and avoided eye contact, they would pretend he didn't exist and he could do the same.

Saderia never noticed Dash's sullen glare. Feeling her heart leap with excitement, she grinned the instant Dingo skidded to a stop on the border with his paws just brushing the grass. When he sat back and looked up at her with a faint grin, she almost jumped at him in excitement. Rising to her paws, she stepped up to the border and grinned while the other three dingoes skidded to a stop behind their Leader. Her eyes glowed with happiness and enthusiasm. "Hi, Dingo! It's good to see you!"

Dingo grinned and nodded to her with a bright gleam in his light brown eyes, his tail flicking eagerly back and forth. "You too, Saderia."

"Hi, tiger," Rip added, peeking out from behind Dingo and giving her a wave with a wide, sloppy grin.

Saderia rolled her eyes, but couldn't wipe the grin off her face. "Hi, Rip. Hi, Tear." When she nodded to the plump orange canine standing on the other side of Dingo, the short-haired dog gave her a faint smile and waved back. Glancing behind Dingo at the canine standing between Rip and Tear, she smiled and warmly flicked her tail. "Hi, Lightning."

The sleek yellow dingo smiled and dipped his head to her with a wave. "Hello, Saderia."

Saderia just smiled in response, then looked back up at Dingo and narrowed her eyes, feeling a quick flash of concern. “Is everything going all right with you, Dingo?”

Dingo rolled his eyes and flicked her playfully with his tail. “Yep, everything’s fine. You don’t need to worry, Saderia.” He gave her a faint grin, then glanced past her at the crowd of animals behind her. Catching their eyes, he smiled a warm smile and nodded to them. “To whom do I owe the pleasure of speaking?”

Saderia glanced back over her shoulder and flicked her tail toward her cheetah/leopard friend. “You already know Loki.” When Saderia gestured to her, the cheetah smiled and waved to Dingo, while Dingo grinned and nodded back. Turning around, Saderia flicked her tail toward Maeta and Tawny, giving them both a faint smile. “This is Maeta, the leader of her neighborhood, the Home of the Leopards. And this is Tawny, Maeta’s ni—er...daughter.” Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Maeta shoot her a warm smile, grateful that she had changed her introduction of Tawny since the tiny cub didn’t know she wasn’t her real mother. Faintly returning the smile, she gestured to Dingo with a flick of her tail. “Maeta and Tawny, I’m sure you two already know who this is. This is Dingo, the Leader of the desert.”

Maeta instantly dipped her head and nodded to Dingo, her eyes shining with respect and her words polite but warm. “Greetings, Leader Dingo. It’s nice to formally meet you.”

Dingo nodded back to her with a smile, his words tinged with the same air of formality. “The same to you. I’m pleased to make your acquaintance.”

While Maeta simply smiled in return, Tawny looked up from batting at a sprig of grass with a glimmer of wonder in her wide brown eyes. A playful smile curled up the corners of her mouth when she caught sight of Dingo. Before anyone could react, she suddenly leapt away from Maeta and lunged toward Dingo’s lightly flicking tail with a squeal of delight. In a flash, she pounced at his shaggy tail and pinned it to the ground with her claws, making Dingo jump with a yelp of surprise.

Maeta’s eyes went wide with shock and her fur bristled in mortification. “Tawny!” As fast as she could, she leapt toward her niece and yanked her away from Dingo’s tail, her expression tense with horror and

humiliation. “How many times have I told you not to chase other animals’ tails? That is an important and respected Leader!”

The instant the words left her mouth, Rip threw his head back and burst out laughing with a wild, hyena-like guffaw. “*Respected?*” Laughing wildly to himself and shaking his head, he pointed to Dingo with a shaking red paw and struggled to choke out his words past his laughter. “She—She thinks *you’re* actually important and respect—”

“Ah, shut it,” Dingo snapped with a roll of his eyes, flicking Rip with his tail and trying to hide a grin.

“What?” Rip snickered, giving him a leering sneer. “I can say it! I’m your brother!”

Dingo just shook his head with a good-natured grin and ignored his older brother. With a soft sigh, he glanced at Maeta and dipped his head to her with a kinder, more sober smile. “It’s all right. I don’t mind. Here,” he added, flicking his tail toward the tiny cub.

Instantly, Tawny’s eyes lit up with excitement. With a playful squeal, she leapt away from Maeta and lunged toward his tail. When he flicked it away from her, she eagerly leapt after it to chase it, her eyes shining with exhilaration. Maeta instantly tensed when the tiny cub sprang after his tail, then relaxed and shot him a grateful look when she realized he truly didn’t mind.

From where he stood hiding behind Saderia, Dash shot Tawny a glance out of the corner of his eye and frowned. An irrational surge of jealousy shot through him when he saw her leap after the canine’s tail with an excited, happy squeal, seeming not to notice anything else around her. Just as a test, he flicked his tail toward her a few times, but she never spared a glance at it. Tucking his tail defensively around his paws, he felt an absurd sense of bitterness. Even the cub seemed to like Dingo more than him. That wasn’t fair. *He* was supposed to be the one the cub liked.

Just as those ridiculous thoughts flitted through Dash’s mind, Dingo looked past the others and locked eyes with him. With a faint grin, Dingo raised his eyebrows at him in such a way that Dash was certain that somehow he had just read his mind. And now he was laughing at him. Even though that was insane and impossible, he couldn’t help but feel defensive. Without even realizing it, he shot Dingo a deadly glare just as the dog flicked his tail toward him and raised his voice to a joking shout.

“Yeah, I see you hiding over there, Dash!” Dingo chuckled and arched an eyebrow. “Don’t you want to come out and say hi?”

Dash could think of several things he’d rather do, but he tried not to let his annoyance show. Biting back a weary sigh, he reluctantly forced himself to step out from behind Saderia and gave Dingo a curt nod without meeting his eyes. “Hi.”

Dingo raised an eyebrow. “Yeah, I’m doing fine, thanks for asking.”

Dash rolled his eyes. “Hi, Dingo. How are you?” he amended, not bothering to hide the edge in his voice.

Dingo just shook his head and chuckled to himself. “You’re a trip sometimes, Dash.” Ignoring Dash’s cold stare, he turned to gaze around at his companions and eagerly flicked his tail toward the desert. “Anyway, is everyone ready to leave? It takes a few hours or so to get to the camp, so we’ve got a bit of walking ahead of us.”

Saderia eagerly leapt to her paws, her eyes shining with excitement. “Yes, we’re ready.” She paused, then glanced back at her companions with a hopeful smile. “Right?”

Maeta and Loki nodded and quickly rose to their paws, their eyes lighting up with excitement. Keeping his face turned toward the ground, Dash glanced up out of the corner of his eye and gave a stiff nod, though he seemed so reluctant he almost appeared to struggle to move his head.

Dingo didn’t notice. With a thoughtful glimmer in his eyes, he glanced at the desert for a long moment, then slowly turned back around to look down at the tiny leopard cub leaping at his tail. “In that case...” Pulling his tail away, he gently leaned down to pick up the cub by the scruff of her neck and rose to carry her over to Maeta. Giving the leopard leader a more serious look, he leaned down and set the smiling cub down at her paws. “I would advise carrying her. I don’t want her to run off and get lost in the desert—it’s almost impossible to find someone once they get separated from the group.”

Maeta narrowed her eyes with a more serious nod and hastily leaned down to pick up her niece when Dingo stepped away.

With a more light-hearted smile, Dingo padded back toward the border and glanced back at his companions with a bright twinkle in his eyes. Giving the forest animals a faint grin, he nodded toward the desert and

flicked his tail in a signal for them to follow him. “Let’s get going! We’ve got a few hours of walking ahead of us!”

Saderia instantly leapt toward him to follow him, her eyes shining with excitement and her heart beating faster with hope. Carrying Tawny by her scruff, Maeta quickly rose to her paws and stepped after the dingo Leader, signaling for him to lead the way, while Loki followed beside her.

Reluctantly, Dash forced himself to his paws and slunk after them, keeping his eyes locked on the ground. Without a word, he wearily fell into step behind them to let Dingo lead the way, knowing there was nothing he could do to stop it now. Even so, he couldn’t help but hope that *something* would happen to stop this trip before it began...

Silence hung over the desert. Trapped in a quiet torn between tense and peaceful, Saderia padded silently alongside Dingo, her absent eyes locked on the endless sand dunes before her. While she and the canine Leader led the way through the dunes, their companions followed close behind them. Carrying Tawny by the scruff, Maeta walked alongside Loki just behind Saderia and Dingo. Rip and Tear padded on either side of them to block them in for protection, though their eyes were bright with excitement rather than tension. Every now and then, Dingo’s shaggy red brother cracked a joke with Loki and laughed in that wild, raucous voice of his.

Lightning took up the rear of the procession to keep an eye on the land behind them, though his yellow eyes shone with excitement and warmth. Every now and then, he spoke to Maeta about Bunny and Tawny or took turns helping her carry her tiny cub. Dash slunk along behind them all, keeping his dark amber eyes locked on his paws. He never once said a word or even bothered to look up at them. When Saderia dared to cast a glance back at him, she preferred to think that he was helping Lightning keep an eye out for any attackers to protect them instead of just ignoring them. It made the trip slightly easier.

After spending a little over an hour or so walking through the desert, the group of animals had gradually grown silent. Only a few light comments were made as the party moved through the sand dunes. Quiet had fallen over the group. Saderia barely noticed. Throughout the whole procession, she had barely said a word, too caught up in her troubled

thoughts and her hope of getting to the camp as soon as possible. Even now that silence had fallen over the group, all she wanted to do was reach the camp. Getting there and talking to Dingo alone were the only things that mattered anymore.

Seeming lost in his own thoughts, Dingo looked up at the land ahead and grinned. An excited gleam lit up his face and he quickly turned to look back over his shoulder, his tail swishing eagerly back and forth. "Look!" When his companions turned to face him, he gestured to the tall sand dune ahead of him with a grin. "We're almost there! It's just over the next dune!" When the others brightened up with excitement, Dingo grinned and started to say something else, but never got the chance.

Without warning, a wild, earsplitting howl burst out from behind the sand dune and split through the silent desert air. Dingo's eyes went wide. With a stunned look, he froze in place and whipped around to stare at the sand dune, his fur rising up in surprise. Beside him, Saderia froze and whipped around to look at the dune, snapping out of her thoughts. The instant her eyes locked on the sandy hill ahead of her, a deafening barrage of loud, furious howls boomed through the air.

Saderia's eyes went wide. Behind her, every one of her companions froze and whipped around to face the sound, their eyes wide with surprise. Soft gasps rang through the crowd of animals. With wide eyes, Dingo stood frozen to the spot as earsplitting howls burst through the air. All the fur on his back stood on end and his face grew dark with horror. Realization seemed to dawn in his eyes as the howls echoed through the air. Saderia could practically see his heart sinking.

Blinking several times, the canine Leader snapped out of his haze and gritted his teeth, his fur bristling with panic. "Rip! Tear! Lightning!" With a quick glance back over his shoulder, he lashed his tail and narrowed his eyes, hiding his fear with a dark growl. "Come on!"

Without another word, he whipped around and lunged toward the tall dune ahead of him as fast as he could. His companions didn't need to be told twice. In a flash, Rip, Tear, and Lightning raced away from the group and charged after Dingo as fast as their paws could carry them, their eyes dark and grim. Fear flickered across their faces, but they hid their unease with low growls. In a flash, they charged after their Leader, leaving Saderia and her friends standing frozen on the sand.

Saderia's heart skipped a beat. Suppressing a shudder, she gritted her teeth when another round of agonized howls boomed out from behind the sand dune. All the fur along her back bristled in terror and her heart lurched with fear. She didn't give herself time to think. The instant the dingoes took off running toward the dune, she lunged after them, her heart racing in her chest and her mind whirling with panic.

In a flash, her friends took off running behind her as fast as they could, letting out stunned gasps and exchanging fearful glances. With wide eyes, Loki streaked after her at a slower pace than normal, seeming torn between wanting to get closer and wanting to stay behind. With nervous, narrowed eyes, Maeta raced alongside her, carrying Tawny tightly in her jaws. Fear glowed in the tiny cub's wide brown eyes and her expression was bright with shock and confusion. Even Dash looked up and lunged after them as the howls tore through the air, his fur bristling and his eyes growing wide with shock. Saderia barely spared a glance at any of them.

As fast as she could, she raced after Dingo and his canine companions, her heart thumping in her chest. The wild screams echoing through the air boomed in her ears, sending shivers down her spine. Fighting back panic, she lunged toward the tall dune in front of her and raced up the side of it as quickly as possible. With a wild gasp, she leapt to the top of it just as Dingo and his friends skidded to a stop in front of her. Streaking to a halt beside them, she looked up at the land beyond the dune and froze. Her breath caught in her throat.

Right before her eyes, the dingo camp split apart in a wild, vicious battle. Brutal howls boomed out from every inch of the wide camp before her, making her ears burn. All around camp, dingoes lunged at each other with brutal snarls and deafening screams. Hordes of canines clashed in the center of camp around the water trough, making it hard to even see the light brown sand beneath their paws. With eyes flashing with hatred and determination, the dogs stumbled across the sand, slashing and biting at their enemies and snarling at the tops of their lungs. Dingoes charged across the light brown sand and wove in between the dens after each other, screaming and growling as loud as they could. Everywhere she turned, hundreds of canines swarmed across the sand, slashing at each other with wild, brutal swipes. The thick scent of blood curled up into the air.

Screams burst out from every inch of the camp. Dingoes swarmed all around it, slashing at each other and howling at the tops of their lungs. One light brown dog threw another shaggy brown canine backward and slammed his head into the water trough in the center of camp. With a brutal crack, the dingo winced and slumped to the ground beneath the swarm of fighters racing through the camp. Sandy water splashed out onto the ground just as he disappeared beneath the crowd of fighters.

Around the tall sand dunes bordering the wide camp, two dingoes threw their enemy down the slope of a dune. With a deafening howl, the dingo flew downward and landed on his back on the rocky edge of a den with a raw, painful smack. In a flash, his attackers leapt down the dune and lunged onto him with wild, furious snarls. All around camp, dingoes streaked with blood and covered in scars raced away from the battlefield, howling at the tops of their lungs. Others lunged deeper into the camp and lashed out at their enemies as hard as they could, their furious voices blending together in the air. The thick air hanging over the camp seemed even hotter with the sick scent of blood.

Saderia's eyes grew wide with horror. Hardly daring to breathe, she stared down at the brutal battle just below her, her fur bristling and her heart skipping a beat. So many dingoes charged through the camp, slashing at every canine they saw. Even when she tried, she couldn't distinguish Dingo's pack members from the enemy. All she could see were hordes of dingoes splattered with blood struggling to get the upper hand and lashing out at every dog they saw. Her mind spun with terror at the thought. She couldn't even tell who the enemy might be. Did that mean the dingoes had turned on each other? What was going on?

Dingo didn't miss a beat. Seeming to know exactly what was going on, he narrowed his eyes and gritted his teeth, barely noticing the gasps of surprise that rang out as Loki and the others skidded to a stop behind him. A low growl rumbled in his throat. Lashing his tail, he whipped around to face his canine companions with dark, flashing brown eyes. "Rip and Tear, join the fight and drive these idiots out of our camp! Lightning, go find Thunder in the battle and send him to me! Got it?"

Rip quickly dipped his head. "Yes, Dingo." Without another word, the dark red dog leapt down the side of the dune and charged into the battle with a loud, ringing howl. Tear instantly tore after him with a furious shout

of his own. Side by side, the two brothers lunged into the middle of the vicious fray and vanished behind a crowd of screaming fighters, their howls blending in with the others. Lightning streaked into the battlefield behind them in a quick flash of yellow fur. With a sharp shout of his own, he dove into the fray and disappeared in an instant, swallowed up by the crowd of fighters in the center of camp.

Dingo narrowed his eyes and flattened his ears with a growl. Baring his fangs, he lurched forward to follow his friends into the battlefield, then paused. With a sharp lash of his tail, he whipped around to face Saderia and the stunned forest animals standing behind her. His eyes met hers and flashed with seriousness. “Stay here and stay hidden. Don’t leave this place until the battle is over unless you have to.” Before Saderia could protest, he whipped around, shot down the side of the dune, and dove into the battle in a flash of shaggy brown fur, letting out a ringing howl. Before Saderia could make a move to stop him, he flew past the wall of fighters on the outskirts of camp and disappeared into the fray, his howl joining the others in a wild, deafening chorus.

Saderia’s eyes widened in horror. “Dingo!” With a gasp, she lurched forward to stop him, but didn’t move fast enough. In a flash, he had already disappeared into the fray. Her heart skipped a beat. Feeling her fur bristle with terror, she let out a shaky gasp and froze in place, her mind spinning with fear. Hardly daring to breathe, she stared out at the brutal battle before her with wide eyes, desperately scanning the leagues of fighters for any sign of Dingo. No matter where she turned, though, all she could see were hordes of blood-streaked dingoes lunging toward each other and howling as loud as they could. Dingo was nowhere to be seen. He had disappeared.

Her heart skipped a beat. Feeling her breath grow short, she stared out at the battlefield with wide eyes, her head spinning and her blood burning with panic. Dingoes charged all across the land in front of her, filling the air with their loud, raucous howls. With the snarls of the dingoes ringing in her ears and the thick scent of blood tickling her nose, Saderia felt like she was suffocating. Her heart beat faster until she could barely feel it.

Everywhere she looked, all she could see were hordes of dingoes slashing at each other with vicious swipes of their claws and tearing into each other with bared fangs. She could barely tell one dog from another. All

around the camp, dingoes tackled each other to the ground and tore open wounds across their blood-streaked bodies, their eyes gleaming with fury and their howls booming through the air. Her heart lurched. No matter where she turned, all she could see was blood and violence with no sign of Dingo. Every part of her seemed to scream with panic as the battle unfolded before her eyes.

“Dingo!” Before she could think about what she was doing, she bunched her muscles and lunged off the top of the tall sand dune as fast as she could. Gasps rang out behind her and Dash’s frantic shout rang in her ears, but she ignored them. As fast as she could, she flew down the sand dune toward the battlefield with her heart pounding in her throat. Bracing herself against the screams ringing out around her, she gritted her teeth and dove into the fray before she could stop herself.

Howls boomed out all around her. With a shrill gasp, Saderia flew past the hordes of snarling fighters on the edge of the battlefield and stumbled out onto the blood-streaked sand on the outskirts of the camp. Practically tripping over her own paws, she staggered out into the middle of the fray and froze, her eyes wide with surprise. Her heart stopped.

No matter where she turned, she couldn’t even see the sand beneath her. Dingoes swarmed past her on all sides, locked in brutal battles. Screaming at the tops of their lungs, dogs stumbled around her everywhere she looked, tearing into each other with claws and teeth and spattering the ground with blood. The scent of gore was so overpowering it nearly made her choke. The entire world seemed to blur and spin around her. Canines stumbled past her and threw each other to the ground right beside her, but she could barely tell any of them apart.

Saderia’s heart lurched. With a shaky gasp, she forced herself to move without feeling her paws hitting the ground. Without knowing where to go or what to do, she tore past a horde of snarling fighters and raced deeper into the fray, her mind spinning with terror. Desperately, she wove around hordes of fighting canines and charged deeper into the center of camp, searching desperately for any sign of Dingo.

Snarls rang out around her with every step she took. With every crowd of fighting, snarling canines she passed, several of them snapped around to face her, their eyes glinting with hatred and bloodlust. Their

furious snarls followed her as she ran, sending shivers racing down her spine. Their brutal shouts rang in her ears.

“Forest food! Kill her!”

“It’s that stupid Princess tiger! Make her pay!”

Saderia’s breath caught and a shaky gasp tore out of her throat. Struggling to breathe, she whipped around to face the sources of the brutal snarls as she tore through the crowds of fighters. Everywhere she turned, dingoes snapped up to look at her as she passed, their eyes narrowing and their fangs gleaming in furious snarls. Every dingo she passed seemed to growl at her as she shot past them, as if all of them were against her and no allies remained. Her mind whirled. What was happening?

Claws lashed out at her as she tore through the crowd. With a shrill cry of alarm, she ducked when dingoes slashed at her with quick, brutal swipes of their paws, trying to trip her up before returning to their battles. With every horde of fighters she passed, several of them lashed out at her with claws and shouted insults after her. Desperately, Saderia wove around the crowds of snarling fighters, ducking under the attacks of the enemy dingoes. Pain burned through her body when their claws nicked her sides or caught her ear, but she kept moving, refusing to slow down.

Her vision blurred as she charged through the battlefield, making her breath catch in her throat. The entire world seemed to twist and quiver right before her eyes. All around her, the battlefield seemed to flicker in and out of focus as she charged through it, sending shivers racing down her spine. Her heart skipped a beat. When she dared to look up at the fray around her, it didn’t look like it had before. One minute, the world around her looked like Dingo’s camp under attack. Dozens of dingoes charged through the familiar sand dunes with brutal howls and clashed around the water trough in the center of camp and the dens on the outskirts. Everywhere she turned, she could see nothing but dogs tackling each other to the ground, their howls rising in the air. Just as the scene swam before her eyes, though, it flickered and changed.

In the next minute, the familiar landscape of Dingo’s camp disappeared. Instead, all she could see were miles of barren, bloody sand all around her, shadowed by a dark formation just out of sight. Dingoes and forest animals alike charged across the gore-covered sand, screaming at the tops of their lungs. With earsplitting shrieks of pain and fury, the forest

animals lunged toward the enemy dogs alongside the dingoes and stumbled across the sand, fighting to gain the upper hand. A deafening cacophony of agonized screams and furious snarls boomed through the thick air around her like ripples through a sea of blood. A second later, the vision faded and she was back in Dingo's camp instead of Rock's.

Her heart skipped a beat. Frantically shaking her head, she tried to push the visions away, but everywhere she ran, the world seemed to flicker and change around her. With every step she took, she seemed to race in and out of the skirmish in Dingo's camp and the war in Rock's. The screams and howls around her seemed to waver in and out of earshot in wild, inharmonious tones, louder one minute and softer the next. Her own paws stumbled over each other and her mind spun. With deep, shaking breaths she couldn't hear, she stumbled to a sluggish stop in the center of camp, feeling as if she were moving in slow motion. Barely feeling her own erratic heartbeat, she struggled to look up past the blur of visions spinning through her mind and froze.

Her eyes snapped to the two tall, proud dens at the very back of the camp past the fray all around her and her heart skipped. Instead of Dingo and Thunder's small sand dune dens obscured by walls of fighters, all she saw was a monstrous shadow. Rock's enormous den rose up over the heads of the fighters all around her, so dark it was almost black against the glinting light of the sun. Its dark, ominous shadow fell over the heads of the snarling canines all around her and sent a shiver of cold racing through her. Saderia's heart skipped a beat and her eyes grew wide with horror. The enormous rock formation towered far over her head, looking realer than everything around her. When she looked closely, she could almost see Rock standing on the edge of the huge, jutting platform, staring down at the fighters with a wide grin and a glint in his dark brown eyes.

Her heart stopped. Feeling her breath catch in her throat, she stared up at Rock's monstrous den with wide eyes. All the fighting and snarling and the scent of blood whisking past her seemed to fade away into the background until she barely noticed any of it. All she could see was Rock's enormous ledge towering over her head with the evil tyrant himself leering down at her from the top. Fear streaked through her, making even her blood feel icy cold. Her paws stumbled backward to get away, but she barely even felt herself moving. Her entire body felt frozen with fear.

“It’s not real,” she whispered to herself, barely hearing her own shaking voice. “It’s not real. Rock’s dead. It’s not real. It’s not *real!*”

“Hey, it’s that forest Princess!”

Saderia’s heart skipped when a loud, sneering voice suddenly split through the air, booming out over the howls of the other fighters and slicing through her vision. With a gasp, she whipped around just as Rock’s den vanished before her eyes and froze as reality flickered back into view. In a flash, three dingoes suddenly leapt out from behind a throng of fighting canines and skidded to a stop just in front of her. When their eyes locked on hers, their faces lit up with cruel glee and their mouths curled up in wide, bloodthirsty sneers. The dark brown dog in the middle of the three canines licked his lips and eagerly lashed his tail.

“Kill her!”

In a flash, all three dingoes let out wild, sneering howls and lunged toward her as fast as they could.

Saderia’s heart skipped a beat. Every part of her shouted for her to move, but she couldn’t. Her eyes went wide. Stumbling back a pace, she opened her mouth in a wild, deafening scream just as the dingoes leapt toward her.

“Get away from her!” Before any of the dingoes could tackle her to the ground, a shaggy brown dog suddenly leapt out from behind her with a wild, furious howl. In a flash, the skinny dog lunged toward the enemy canine in the center of the group just as he started to leap forward to attack. Before the enemy dog could react, the lanky dingo slammed into him with a brutal crack and shoved him to the ground. The enemy dingo’s strangled yelp rang through the air.

Saderia’s eyes widened in shock and her heart skipped a beat. “Dingo!”

Dingo barely spared a glance at her. With light brown eyes flashing with rage, he slammed the dark brown enemy into the sand with a harsh crunch and drove his claws into his shoulders. The enemy dog let out a strangled howl of pain and alarm, but Dingo never gave him a chance to squirm away. With a furious snarl, he tore his claws away from his shoulders and slashed them across the dingo’s chest as fast as he could, ignoring the enemy’s deafening shriek of pain. Without letting up, Dingo tried to tear his claws across the dog’s face, but never got the chance. In a

flash, one of the other enemy dingoes leapt toward him, his blue eyes gleaming with fury. With a brutal snarl, he lunged onto Dingo's back before he could shred the dark brown dog and drove his claws into his shoulders, making Dingo jump with a sharp cry of alarm.

The pack Leader didn't hesitate. With a furious snarl, he lurched backward before the blue-eyed dog could dig his claws in deeper. Letting out a stunned yelp, the blue-eyed enemy flew backward and slammed onto the ground with a sharp thud. Dingo instantly tried to swivel around to land back on his paws, but didn't get the chance. With a thunderous snarl, the last enemy dog shot toward him in a streak of bristling light brown fur. Before Dingo could react, the light brown dog slammed into him and knocked him back onto the ground with a harsh thud.

A sharp yelp tore out of Dingo's throat. With flashing brown eyes, the light brown dog drove his claws deep into Dingo's shoulders, spilling blood out across the sand. Gritting his teeth, Dingo bit back a howl of pain and kicked up with his back paws as hard as he could, catching the light brown dog's stomach with his claws and knocking the breath out of him. Letting out a wild yelp of pain, the light brown dingo instantly stumbled backward, his claws leaving Dingo's shoulders.

Dingo didn't waste a second. In a flash, he leapt to his paws and whipped around just in time to see the blue-eyed yellow brown dingo race toward him with a dark snarl. At the same time, the dark brown dog he had tackled leapt to his paws with flashing brown eyes and a wild howl of fury. Instantly, both enemy dogs raced toward him on either side of him, baring their fangs and bunching their muscles to strike.

Dingo glanced back at the dark brown dingo behind him, then spared a glance at the blue-eyed dog in front of him, his eyes glinting with determination. Just as both dogs leapt into the air to tackle him with wild, ringing howls, he ducked down in a quick flash of speed. Before either canine could react, they both slammed into each other right over his head with a brutal, painful crack. Letting out agonized yelps of pain, both canines collapsed to the ground on either side of him, their muzzles twisted and their shoulders marred with claw marks. Pain glimmered in their eyes.

The instant the two dogs collapsed to the ground, the light brown canine Dingo had kicked away suddenly leapt out behind him, letting out a brutal snarl. In a flash, Dingo whipped around to face his attacker. Right

before the dog could drive his claws into his bloody shoulders and throw him to the ground, Dingo whipped out his paw in a quick flash of speed and tore his claws across his attacker's eyes. Pain flashed on the light brown dog's face. With a sharp screech of pain, he stumbled to the ground right in front of Dingo, his eyes squeezed shut and his face streaming with blood.

Before the dog could make another move, Dingo smacked his claws across his face as hard as he could, lifting the enemy's front paws off the ground. With a deafening howl, the light brown dingo flew backward and tumbled to the ground, his paws flailing desperately to gain traction. Instantly, he rolled across the ground and crashed to a stop away from Dingo. Before the Leader could make another move to attack, the light brown dog stumbled hastily to his paws, gasping for breath and whimpering in pain. In a flash, he cast one quick glance back at Dingo, then whipped around. As fast as he could, he took off running through the battlefield away from Dingo and Saderia, his tail tucked between his legs and his sides heaving with pained gasps.

Dingo narrowed his eyes. Gritting his teeth, he whipped around just in time to see the dark brown and yellow brown dogs race toward him. The instant his blazing eyes snapped to their faces, both dingoes froze in front of him, their fur bristling and their fangs bared but their eyes tense with unease. Growls rumbled in their throats, but both exchanged nervous glances before looking back at the pack Leader.

Dingo flattened his ears and bared his fangs in a dark, threatening snarl. "If either of you even *look* at her, you'll be as dead as your filthy Leader!"

Both dingoes winced at his harsh tone of voice. For a split second, they hesitated in front of him, their fangs bared but their expressions nervous. As if unsure of what to do, both stared at him for a long, tense moment of silence, their fur bristling and their tails lashing with unease. After a tense beat of silence, the blue-eyed dingo hesitated, looked at Dingo with narrowed eyes, cast a tense glance at his companion, then whipped around. Before either of them could react, the blue-eyed dog took off running through the battlefield as fast as he could, his tail tucked between his legs and his voice raised in a howl of alarm.

The dark brown dog whipped around and stared after him in shock, then instantly turned back to Dingo. Blinking several times, he gritted his

teeth and took a step back, his fur bristling but his tail swishing wildly with fear. For a long moment, he stared at Dingo and hesitated, then flattened his ears and spat at Dingo's paws. "You'll pay for what you did, Dingo!" With a reluctant, furious growl, he whipped around and raced after his companion as fast as his legs could carry him. In a flash, he dove behind a screaming crowd of fighters and disappeared from sight, leaving Saderia and Dingo alone in the middle of the fray.

With narrowed eyes, Dingo watched him race away until he vanished from sight. Taking in deep, quiet gasps of air, he stared at the place where his enemy had disappeared for a long moment, then slowly turned back to look at Saderia. Saderia's breath caught when his eyes locked on hers and her heart beat faster, though whether it was from relief at being saved or fear of the lecture she knew would follow, she wasn't sure. The instant his eyes locked on hers, a deep sense of concern and sternness flashed in Dingo's light brown irises. With a sharp flick of his tail, he opened his mouth to say something, then froze. His eyes darted to something past Saderia.

Feeling a jolt of alarm shoot through her, Saderia whipped around to follow Dingo's gaze and froze. Her heart lurched in her chest. Right behind her, Dash skidded to a stop just a few paces away from her and Dingo. His wide amber eyes shone with fear and his fur bristled with panic. With wild, gasping breaths, he stumbled to a stop the instant Saderia's eyes locked on his. "Saderia!" Letting out a shaky gasp, he started to say something else, then froze when Dingo stepped out from behind her. Instantly, Dash's eyes narrowed and a darker emotion flickered across the fear in his gaze, but he never got a chance to say a word.

Dingo barely noticed the anger that flashed across his face. "Dash!" With a distracted scowl and a tense flick of his tail, he glanced at the wild fray around him, then looked back at the dark lion and narrowed his eyes. "Take Saderia out of the battle! I have to keep fighting!"

Dash narrowed his eyes and hesitated for a moment, then merely gave him a curt nod. Hiding the annoyance on his face, he raced toward them and only paused when he reached Saderia's side. His eyes lingered on Dingo's, never looking away. The instant he skidded to a stop in front of Saderia, Dingo met his eyes and gave him a dark, serious look, as if warning him to take care of her...or else. Without another word, the Leader

gave him a faint nod, then whipped around and darted away from them. In a quick streak of shaggy brown fur, he charged off into the fray and disappeared behind a horde of fighting canines.

Saderia's heart skipped with panic. With a shaky gasp, she instantly lurched after him to follow him, but Dash grabbed her shoulder roughly with a paw before she could. Her eyes widened in surprise. Freezing in place, she turned when he whirled her around to face him, and blinked in surprise when she saw the odd darkness in Dash's eyes.

The dark lion flattened his ears and narrowed his eyes at her in a dark scowl, his voice nothing but a terse growl. "He'll be fine. Now let's get out of the battle."

Saderia blinked several times. "But..."

"Let's go!" Dash growled, lashing his tail in annoyance. "He'll be fine. Now come on!" Without giving her a chance to protest, he pushed her roughly to the side, gesturing which direction to run in. Before she could protest, he darted out ahead of her, flicking his tail to signal for her to follow.

Saderia hesitated for a split second of doubt, then forcefully shook the nervous thoughts out of her head. Taking a shaky gulp of air, she hastily stumbled after him as fast as her paws could carry her, her heart beating faster with panic and fear. As fast as she could, she followed Dash past crowds of screaming fighters, trying not to wince at the raucous howls that boomed in her ears or the scent of blood that tickled her nose. Flattening her ears, she chased after Dash even faster, willing herself not to look at the crowds around her and desperately telling herself not to look back out of fear that she would see Rock's horrible den in her mind. Blindly, she charged across the bloody camp after Dash, diving past crowds of snarling fighters and struggling not to look at any of them. The same words repeated in her mind over and over again, struggling to keep her sane. *It's not real. It's not real...*

Dash raced through the swarms of bloody canines as fast as he could, hardly bothering to make sure Saderia was following behind him. Blindly, he stumbled past the crowds of fighters, his mind whirling with confusion and bitterness. He barely even noticed the screams and howls of the canines around him and didn't wince when dogs tumbled to the ground beside him. As fast as he could, he wove around crowds of fighters and

charged toward the edge of the battlefield with only one thought on his mind. Why hadn't he been the one to save Saderia? Why was it always Dingo who protected her from the bad guys while he sat back on the sidelines or caused trouble he never intended to cause? His heart burned with anger and he gritted his teeth. He was almost glad Dingo had gotten hurt protecting her.

Oblivious to Dash's dark thoughts, Saderia raced blindly after him. Trying to shake off a shiver of dread, she dove past a wall of fighting canines on the very outskirts of the camp and stumbled out of the battle. A gasp tore out of her throat and she instantly took in a deep breath, as if she had been suffocating under the scent of blood the entire time she had been in the fray. Taking in deep gulps of air, she tried not to shudder and followed after Dash, leaving the hordes of canines behind.

Wincing against the screams that boomed out behind her, Saderia stumbled up the side of the tall sand dune after Dash, willing herself not to look back. Dash never looked back either. As quickly as she could, Saderia staggered up to the top of the dune and stopped right behind Dash, trying to hide a shiver. From where they had remained standing at the top of the sand dune, Loki, Maeta, and Tawny instantly snapped around to look at her. Maeta's eyes darkened with concern, while Tawny let out a sharp squeal and hid behind her aunt's paw. It seemed she had taken shelter beneath the leopard leader after being set down sometime during the battle—thus freeing Maeta up to fight in case she had to.

The second Saderia skidded to a halt, Loki narrowed her eyes in a flash of concern, her tail flicking sharply back and forth. "Saderia! Dash!" Letting out a tense shout, she lurched toward her two friends and stopped when Saderia and Dash snapped around to look at her. Her narrowed green eyes darkened with worry. "Are you guys okay?"

Saderia narrowed her eyes and looked away, trying to suppress a shudder. "Yeah...We're fine..." She hesitated for a moment, then slowly turned to gaze back out at the battlefield behind her. A shiver raced down her spine at the sight of the swarms of canines fighting all around the camp, but a colder sense of fear shot through her when a memory of Rock's den flickered before her eyes at the back of camp, threatening to become real. Her fur bristled, but she struggled to hide her fear.

Taking a deep, shaky breath, she forced the image away, not wanting to let her fear get the best of her. Keeping the flickering image of Rock's den on the periphery of her vision, she gazed down at the battlefield and scanned the swarms of screaming canines for any sign of Dingo. The instant her eyes snapped to the hordes of canines tumbling across the sand, a sudden realization dawned in her mind. The dingoes hadn't turned on each other. The enemy dingoes weren't from Dingo's pack. They were Rock's old followers, working together to attack the camp.

Her heart lurched, then beat faster. A dark sense of anger and determination suddenly kindled in her chest, burning through the fear still lurking in her heart. Willing herself to fight off her fear, she gazed out at the battlefield and gritted her teeth, feeling a new sense of purpose. "I have to fight," she murmured. "I have to stop them from hurting Dingo's pack."

"No." At the sound of Dash's stern voice, she whipped around to see him staring darkly into her eyes, his face shadowed with seriousness. His eyes narrowed and a low, warning growl rumbled in his throat. "You'll get hurt."

Saderia's fur bristled with indignation and her eyes narrowed, but she made her voice seem calm as she met Dash's gaze. "I won't freeze up again, Dash. I have to help Dingo." Digging her claws into the sand, she glanced back at the battlefield and gritted her teeth, trying not to wince. "As soon as I see him, I'm going back in there to help him."

Dash opened his mouth to protest, but never got the chance. Before he could speak, Loki took a step closer to Saderia and cut him off, her narrowed eyes gleaming with determination. "You do whatever you need to do, Saderia." With a knowing glint in her eyes, the cheetah rested her tail carefully on her shoulder and nodded to her with a dark, uncharacteristically serious frown. "Just be careful."

Saderia blinked in surprise, then nodded, her heart beating faster with determination. Taking a deep breath, she slowly turned back around to face the battle, ignoring Dash's mutinous glare and the fears lurking in the back of her mind. She didn't want to let her weird memories and her own doubts stop her from helping her friend in a battle like this. She wanted to help.

With narrowed eyes, she scanned the battlefield for any sign of Dingo and felt a jolt shoot through her when she caught sight of a shaggy

brown streak of fur. In a wild flash of speed, Dingo raced through the battlefield, ducking under blows from enemy dingoes and baring his fangs in a snarl. He never once stopped to fight any of his attackers or even bothered to look at them. His eyes were locked on something ahead of him. When Saderia followed his blazing brown gaze, she found herself staring at the Leader and Second in Command dens at the back of the camp.

For half a second, she blinked in surprise and almost winced, but her vision didn't flicker. Instead, her eyes snapped to the shadowy entrance of the Leader's den and her heart skipped a beat when she saw a tiny black pup hiding in the darkness of the den, her amber eyes wide and her fur bristling with panic. A burly dark brown dingo slowly stalked toward the den where the pup was hiding, licking his lips and letting out a soft snicker. His eyes gleamed with cruel joy and bloodlust.

A jolt of panic shot through Saderia like a lightning bolt. With a gasp, she lurched forward to race toward the pup to help, even knowing she was too far away, then froze. Before she could make a move to run toward the faraway pup, Dingo suddenly leapt out from a crowd of fighters in front of his den with a thunderous snarl. Just as the burly dog stalking toward Bunny froze and whipped around, Dingo slammed down onto his shoulders with a harsh crack.

The enemy dingo's mouth opened in a wild howl of pain Saderia could just barely hear over the screams of the other fighters. In a flash, the dark brown dog reared back to throw Dingo off, sending him flying backward through the air. Dingo didn't miss a beat. Twisting in midair, he landed on his paws just a few steps away from the dingo and whipped around just in time to see the dog race up behind him. In a flash, he lashed out with a quick swipe of his paw and tore his claws across the enemy dingo's face. When the dog winced with a yelp of pain, Dingo slammed his paw into the side of the canine's legs and swept them out from under him in one quick flash of speed.

Instantly, the enemy dingo collapsed to the ground with a deafening howl of pain and surprise. The second he smacked against the ground, he tried to roll around to jump to his paws, but Dingo never gave him the chance. With flaming brown eyes, he bared his fangs in a snarl and kicked the dingo square in the jaw before he could make a move, sending him rolling away with a sharp, sickening crack. Letting out a wild howl of pain,

the dingo rolled away from him, spilling blood across the sand. In a split second, he tumbled past a horde of fighters on the outskirts of the fray and vanished from sight.

Dingo didn't waste time looking after him. In a flash, he whipped around and dove toward his den, his tail lashing tensely back and forth. Before the tiny pup could protest, he ducked into the shadows and picked her up by the scruff of her neck. Ignoring her thrashing and annoyed growls, he whirled around, cast one quick glance at the battlefield behind him, then dove straight into the midst of the wild fray.

As fast as he could, the Leader charged through the battlefield, weaving in and out of thick, snarling crowds and shielding the tiny pup from the vicious strikes of the enemy dingoes. Without once stopping, he swerved between the fighters, ducking under attacks and carrying the struggling pup tensely by her scruff. In a flash of speed, he tore through the battlefield in a streak of bloody brown fur and shot out past the wall of fighters on the other side of the fray just a few paces away from Saderia.

Hastily, he bounded up the side of the sand dune, leaving the battlefield behind. His blood-spattered sides heaved with pants, but his eyes glowed with determination. Letting out a shaky breath, he stumbled to a stop just in front of the crowd of forest animals and leaned down to drop the tiny black pup at Maeta's paws.

"Watch her for me," he choked out, pushing the pup toward the leopard leader and the frightened leopard cub hiding beneath her. "Keep her safe."

Maeta nodded without a word, her eyes dark with seriousness. Quickly, she pulled the tiny black pup closer to her, forcing her to hide behind her powerful legs where Tawny stood cowering and peering out at the battlefield. With only a quiet growl of reluctance, the pup slipped behind her front legs and stopped, gazing out at the battlefield with narrowed amber eyes.

Tawny's eyes lit up with hope and relief the instant the pup slipped back to hide beside her. "Bunny!" she whispered.

Bunny cast her a glance out of the corner of her eye and smiled, seeming unfazed by what had just happened. "Hi, Tawny," she whispered back, giving her a light flick of her tail.

Saderia glanced down at the bristling pup for a split second, feeling an overwhelming sense of relief. Taking a shaky breath, she tore her eyes away from Bunny and looked up sharply just as Dingo turned to race back into the battle. “Wait!” she called. When Dingo turned around to face her with a bewildered frown, she narrowed her eyes and made herself step forward, swallowing back her fears and refusing to back down. “I want to help, too. I want to fight.”

Dingo opened his mouth to protest, then stopped when he saw the dark, determined gleam in her eyes. For a split second, he hesitated, then nodded with a firm, serious frown on his face. “All right. Come with me then.”

Dash instantly took a step forward, his tail lashing sharply back and forth. “I’m coming, too—”

“No.” Before Dash could say another word, Dingo whipped around to face him and narrowed his eyes, his expression dark with seriousness. “You stay here with Loki and Maeta and help them protect Tawny and Bunny.”

Dash’s eyes widened in disbelief. “But—”

“No buts,” Dingo snapped, shooting him a dark glare and tensely lashing his tail. “Stay here and protect them. If you leave and they get hurt, it’s on your conscience. Saderia and I will fight in the battle. We’ll take care of this.”

Dash shot him a cold, mutinous glare with every ounce of fire and rage he had, but didn’t say a word. Never tearing his eyes away from him, he reluctantly sat back and gritted his teeth, his tail twitching irritably across the ground.

Not noticing his burning glare, Dingo whipped around to face the battlefield and narrowed his eyes. With a dark glint in his fiery brown irises, he flicked his tail to signal for Saderia to follow him and dove down the side of the sand dune to leap back into the battle. In a flash, Saderia raced after him, bunching her muscles and gritting her teeth in determination. Side by side, they charged down the dune and leapt into the fray. In a flash, they disappeared behind a wall of screaming canines into the heart of the battlefield.

Dash glared after him and struggled to bite back the growl rising in his throat. Barely hearing the screams of the fighters billowing out through

the air around him, he gritted his teeth and lashed his tail, wondering just who Dingo thought he was. His heart burned with fury. It seemed power had gone to Dingo's head even faster than it had with his creepy brother. He only wished he could say that to his face.

"Thunder!"

At the sound of Dingo's sharp voice, Saderia tore her eyes off the tense, screaming fray surrounding her and snapped around to look up at her canine friend. When he skidded to a halt in the middle of the bloody battlefield, she instantly froze and stumbled to a stop behind him, her heart lurching in her chest. Taking in a quick gasp of air, she looked up to follow his dark gaze and blinked in surprise.

Thunder skidded to a stop just in front of them, meeting them in the middle of the fray. His dark brown eyes were wide with panic and his shaggy yellow brown fur bristled wildly with fear and exhilaration. Taking in sharp, shallow breaths, he looked up at Dingo with wide eyes and let out a shaky gasp. "Dingo!" Hardly daring to breathe, he gazed around at the hordes of canines stumbling across the sand around him and winced, his tail flicking tensely across the ground. "They came out of nowhere! There's never been this many of them before!"

"Well, there is now." Baring his fangs in a tense growl, Dingo flicked his eyes around the battlefield and wildly lashed his tail, his brown irises glinting with determination. "Here's what I need you to do. Get the dingoes to herd the outcasts to the outskirts of our camp. Push them out from the center of camp and drive them to the very edges of the battlefield, then drive them out of our camp. Got it?"

Thunder hastily dipped his head. "Yes, Dingo." Without another word, the yellow brown Second in Command whipped around and darted off into the battlefield, letting out a wild, deafening howl. Shouting words at the top of his lungs that Saderia could barely hear over the screams of battle, Thunder charged past a horde of fighting canines and disappeared into the fray, leaving her and Dingo alone.

Gritting his teeth, Dingo whipped around to gaze out at the battlefield with glinting light brown eyes, then froze when a raw scream echoed out over the howls of the fighters around them. With a quick gasp,

he whirled around to face the source of the sound and froze, his fur bristling with shock and fury.

A few paces away from him and Saderia, two burly brown dingoes leapt onto a sandy brown canine with wild, brutal howls. Ignoring her furious shrieks and insults, they struggled to pin her down on the sand, their fangs bared and their eyes narrowed. Shouting insults at the top of her lungs, the sandy brown dog kicked out wildly at her attackers, her dark brown eyes glimmering with fury. Saderia's heart lurched with alarm when she caught sight of the troubled dog—eerily, she reminded her of an older version of Claw. She didn't have time to think about the odd resemblance, though.

With a thunderous snarl, Dingo lunged toward the two canines struggling to pin down the sandy brown dog. In a flash, he slammed into the back of one of the burly brown dingoes, sending him stumbling away from the pinned pack member with a yelp. At once, the other dog looked up in surprise, but Saderia didn't give him time to react. Swallowing back her fears, she gritted her teeth and lunged toward him with a wild, furious growl, her claws flashing in the sunlight.

In a burst of speed, she slammed into the dingo's back before he could react and drove her claws into his shoulders, ignoring his wild howl of pain. Instantly, the dingo lurched back onto his back paws to throw her off, sending her flying to the ground. With a harsh thud, Saderia hit the ground hard on her back and winced, her breath leaving her throat. Out of the corner of her eye, she looked up just in time to see the dingo whip around to face her and raise a thick, burly paw to bring it down on her face.

Alarm shot through Saderia. With a breathless gasp of fear, she rolled around just as the dingo's paw slammed down on the ground where her face had been seconds before. As fast as she could, she leapt to her paws and whipped around just in time to see the dingo whirl around and lurch toward her. He raised a paw to slash at her again, but she ducked under the quick blow, feeling his paw soar right over her head and nick her ear. Gritting her teeth, she jumped back when the dingo lurched toward her to bite her leg, avoiding his fangs by inches.

Fury boiled in the dingo's blazing green eyes. Baring his fangs, he instantly raised a paw to strike at her again, but Saderia moved faster. Letting out a sharp hiss of fury, she lurched forward and swiped her claws

across his face as fast as she could, catching his eyes in a lucky strike. At once, the dingo jerked back with a wild, strangled howl of pain, splattering the ground with droplets of blood. Before he could recover, Saderia bared her fangs and lunged toward him. With a brutal snarl, she slammed her claws into his shoulders and shoved him back against the ground, pinning his shoulders to the sand while his head snapped back with a thud.

Pain flashed across the dingo's face and he gritted his teeth in a low growl. Instantly, Saderia drove her claws into his shoulders to pin him down, spilling blood across the sand. Before she could make another move, though, the dingo suddenly kicked up with his back paws. In a flash, his claws tore into Saderia's stomach, knocking the breath from her throat and sending a jolt of pain racing through her body. With a gasp, she stumbled away from him, her belly streaming with blood. Instantly, the dingo staggered to his paws, blinking blood out of his eyes and taking in quick gulps of air. Fighting to hide the pain burning in her bloody belly, Saderia gritted her teeth and instantly tensed to face him, but the fight never came.

In a split second, the burly dingo took one look at her, then gritted his teeth and whipped around with a reluctant growl. Letting out a furious howl, he took off running and shot across the battlefield away from her as fast as his paws could move, his tail streaming out wildly behind him. In a flash, he dove through a crowd of fighting dingoes a few paces away from her and disappeared from sight.

Saderia's breath caught. Feeling her body go numb with relief, she took in a shaky breath and tore her eyes off the place where her enemy had fled. Instantly, she whipped around to find Dingo and felt her heart skip with relief. The second her eyes found her canine friend, Dingo sent his own attacker stumbling back with a quick smack across the face. Streaming blood from his muzzle and his shoulders, the enemy dingo staggered away from him with a wild, painful howl. In a second, he staggered back into the fray around them and disappeared from sight, his howl blending in with the others.

Slowly, Saderia relaxed, though her shoulders still felt stiff with tension. In front of her, Dingo took in a shaky gulp of air and whipped back around, tearing his eyes off the place where his enemy had disappeared. With heaving sides and a wildly flicking tail, Dingo hastily stumbled toward the light brown dingo lying on the ground. When her wide dark

brown eyes flicked to his, he let out a shaky breath and flattened his ears in concern. “Are you all right, Sand?”

Saderia’s eyes widened in surprise at the familiar name. For the first time, she realized why the sandy brown dingo looked so much like Claw—she was Dingo and Claw’s mother.

Not noticing Saderia’s stunned gaze, Sand looked up at her son with a grateful gleam in her eyes and nodded hastily, making herself stumble to her paws. “Yes, I’m fine. Thank you, Dingo.” Giving her son one last, lingering glance, she hesitated for a long moment, then narrowed her eyes and turned around to race off into the battle, her tail lashing with fury. Letting out an enraged howl, she dove into the fray and vanished from sight.

Dingo took in a shaky breath of air. For a tense heartbeat, he stared at the place where his mother had disappeared, then abruptly tore his eyes away. With a quick lash of his tail, he gazed out at the battlefield around him and froze, his eyes widening with a slight flicker of hope. Blinking several times, Saderia turned to gaze out at the battlefield around her and felt her heart lurch with surprise.

After just one battle, the center of camp had become abandoned. The thick crowds of snarling, screaming canines that had stumbled across the middle of camp just minutes before had disappeared. Only droves of Dingo’s pack members raced across the bloodstained ground in the center of camp, their eyes locked on the outskirts and their faces tense with determination. When Saderia followed their eyes, her face lit up with hope.

The fight had already been shifted to the outskirts of camp. The ragged, blood-streaked enemy canines had been pushed out of the center of camp and forced back to the very edge of it. Walls and walls of Dingo’s pack members stood blocking the enemy dingoes on the far outskirts of camp. Those at the front of the enormous crowd of pack members snarled and lashed out at the enemy canines struggling to shove past them, pushing them back any time they tried to break through their defenses into camp.

Desperately, the outcasts struggled to push through the wall of dingoes on the very edge of camp, but couldn’t break through. While the outcasts at the front of the group struggled to fight, others warily looked over their shoulders, as if wanting to run but not wanting to turn their backs. More and more pack members raced to join the crowd stretching out

between the two lines of dens at the very back of camp to block the enemy dingoes. In seconds, practically every pack member stood gathered around the back of the camp, fighting the enemy dingoes or waiting to intercept them if they broke through. The rest of the camp was abandoned.

Dingo's eyes gleamed with hope. Taking a step toward the crowd of fighters at the back of camp, he narrowed his eyes and lifted his head in a long, echoing howl. "Stop!"

At once, the pack members at the front of the crowd broke away from their battles and pulled back, their fur bristling with hostility but their faces grave and serious. Slowly, every pack member stumbled away from their battle and backed up into the crowd of pack members to face the outcasts. The instant the pack members pulled away, the blood-streaked outcasts stumbled backward, their eyes wide with panic and their sides heaving with exhaustion. None tried to continue the fight. Looking almost relieved, each one of them stumbled back into the huge crowd of outcasts just outside the camp and clustered together, as if taking shelter in numbers. Slowly, the howls and screams died away to nothing more than silence and dark, warning growls.

In seconds, the two groups of dingoes broke away from each other. The huge crowd of pack members stood gathered at the very back of the battlefield between the two rows of dens on either side of the camp, facing the outcasts with dark, narrowed eyes and threatening growls. An enormous throng of outcasts stood just a few paces away from them outside the camp, eyeing the pack members warily and remaining tensed for battle. Uneasy growls rumbled through their crowd.

Dingo narrowed his eyes. Shaking off his exhaustion, he raised his head and turned to stalk toward the two groups of dingoes facing each other just a few feet away from him. Hastily, Saderia fell into step behind him, facing the two crowds with eyes full of wonder and relief. Without a word, Dingo ducked into the crowd of pack members and started to stalk toward the front of the group. His pack mates instantly parted to let him pass, their faces dark with the same seriousness and determination that shone on his.

With Saderia following close behind him, Dingo stalked past the last few pack members standing firm at the front of the crowd and stepped out into the gap of bloody desert sand between the two crowds of canines. As soon as he stood in between the two groups, he stopped and slowly sat

down, curling his tail tensely over his paws and facing the outcasts with cool, glinting eyes. Saderia quietly stepped after him and sat down just behind him at the front of the crowd of pack members, watching him with tense, narrowed eyes. Silence fell over the desert.

Narrowing his eyes, Dingo glared out at the crowd of outcasts, his light brown irises glinting in the sunlight. “What are you doing here?” When the outcasts winced at his harsh tone and nervously shuffled backward, he gritted his teeth and dropped his voice to a low, threatening growl. “You have no right to be here and no right to attack us. This is our camp. I demand to know why you’re here and why you attacked.”

None of the outcasts spoke. Soundlessly, they glared at Dingo with dark, hate-filled eyes, though none of them said a word. Fear haunted their eyes even behind their furious glares, and many looked away even as others defiantly met his gaze. Silence hung over them. For a long moment, none of the outcasts dared to speak up. Each one of them cast tense, silent glances around at each other, as if searching for someone to speak for them. For what felt like hours, no one stepped forward. After several tense heartbeats of silence, though, one burly brown dingo with scraggly fur and uneasy blue eyes slowly stepped away from the crowd.

Anger glimmered behind the nervousness in his cold blue gaze. Gritting his teeth, he stepped out ahead of the outcasts and narrowed his eyes at Dingo in a cold, furious glare, his tail lashing sharply back and forth. “You don’t deserve to be Leader!” he snarled, his voice ringing with hate. With a wild growl of rage, he curled his lip at Dingo in disgust and spat at his paws. “You filthy different dingo! You’re nothing. You don’t deserve to rule the desert! Rock and Bone were the true Leaders, you disgusting scum!”

While the other outcasts shouted in agreement, Dingo simply narrowed his eyes in a cool, icy glare. “Well, why don’t you all go worship your dead Leaders somewhere else?” he snarled, a dangerous tone in his low voice. “This is my pack and my desert, whether you like it or not, and I will not stand for these attacks. Anyone who can’t accept that isn’t welcome here. I don’t care what any of you mongrels think, but I will not tolerate these attacks. Get out of my camp.”

The outcast gritted his teeth and shot Dingo a withering glare, practically shaking with hatred. “Fine, Dingo,” he spat, baring his fangs in

disgust. “We’ll leave for now.” His eyes flashed with anger. “But you will regret killing Bone and Rock. You’ll regret ever being *born!* We’ll make sure of that.”

“I’m shaking,” Dingo replied with a dry scowl and a sharp flick of his tail. “Leave this camp *now.*”

“Fine.” The outcast eyed him coldly, then bared his fangs in a low snarl. “But we’ll be back.” With one last glare in Dingo’s direction, he curled his lip, then promptly whipped around. Giving his tail one quick lash, he signaled for the other outcasts to follow him. Without sparing another glance back at Dingo, he spat in the sand on the edge of Dingo’s camp, then bounded away from him. In a flash, he darted into the crowd of outcasts and took off running into the desert as fast as his paws could carry him.

As soon as he turned and ran, every outcast in the group hastily leapt to their paws and whipped around to follow him. Shooting Dingo dark, mutinous glares, the entire crowd quickly charged after the lead outcast and bounded off into the desert, leaving the camp far behind. One by one, the outcasts bounded toward the sand dunes surrounding the camp and slowly started to disappear into the desert. Right before the whole crowd ducked behind a dune and vanished from sight, one last growl rose up in the air, splitting through the tense silence hanging over the camp.

“You’ll pay, *different* dingo! You’ll pay!”

Chapter Eight

Unexpected

Dingo stared at the place where the outcasts had disappeared for a long moment, his normally light brown eyes dark and troubled. After a tense heartbeat of silence, he let out a long, weary sigh, his shoulders sagging with defeat. Slowly, he turned back around to face the crowd of pack members behind him and narrowed his eyes. Dozens of tense, questioning eyes bored into him, waiting for him to speak. A dark frown tugged at Dingo's mouth and a shadow crossed his face as he stared out at the legions of pack members before him. After a tense moment of quiet, he took a deep breath and lifted his head to gaze out at the pack, raising his voice to a calm, serious tone. "The battle is over, and the outcasts have fled. For now, we are all safe. Is anybody badly injured?"

A few bloody dingoes exchanged quick glances and shifted in place, but no one spoke up. After a few beats of silence, Dingo simply nodded and flicked his tail, keeping his expression as calm and unreadable as possible. "Good. For those of you with wounds not too serious, splash a bit of water on your injuries and press on them to stop the bleeding, then just take care of them until they heal. If any of your injuries get worse, come see me. Until then, everyone please return to what you were doing. We have fought off the outcasts, and I don't think they'll be returning soon."

He paused, then narrowed his eyes with a darker, more serious frown. "That said, I want extra guards to stand around the camp's perimeter and keep watch today and tomorrow. You, you, and you." With a flick of his tail, he gestured to three dingoes with the least serious injuries at the front of the crowd. "You will be the new guards. In addition to the extra guards, I also want two groups of dingoes to go out into the desert right now and search for signs of Rock's old followers to make sure they're not still hanging around here. If you find them or any sign of them, drive them out—with force, if necessary."

With a flick of his tail, he gestured to a group of four dingoes standing somewhere just behind the front row of pack members in the crowd, then nodded toward another group of three dingoes closer to the middle of the group. “You four and you three will make up these two patrols. Go out and search for those dogs that attacked us to make sure they’re not still here, and be careful. The rest of you can keep an extra eye out for any signs of trouble, but otherwise return to your routines. There were no casualties in this battle and no severe injuries. We won this fight, and you do not need to worry about Rock’s old followers at the moment. I will keep an eye out for them and do whatever needs to be done to stop them from attacking again.”

All the dingoes gathered on the outskirts of the camp seemed to relax. Letting out quiet sighs and nodding silently, the pack members exchanged relieved glances with weak smiles, seeming to release the tension that had haunted them after the battle. A few relieved murmurs spread through the crowd. Slowly, the throng of pack members gathered at the back of camp started to split up and wander back into camp to return to their lives, murmuring to each other and filling the air with the soft sound of conversation.

As the dingoes dispersed around her, Saderia caught the look of gratitude and relief on their faces. Every dingo seemed overwhelmingly relieved that someone had taken charge after the battle—some even seemed surprised that their Leader had actually done his job by calming them down and giving commands. The realization didn’t surprise Saderia. After all, the dingoes had a history of fairly incompetent Leaders...

“Thunder!”

At the sound of Dingo’s tense voice, Saderia turned around to see Dingo rise to his paws and step back into camp, his narrowed light brown eyes tense and guarded. In the middle of the wandering crowd, Thunder paused and looked back, letting the other dingoes step past him into the camp. Narrowing his eyes, the Second in Command quickly turned around and wove back through the crowd. The instant he stepped out from the throng of canines, he looked up to meet Dingo’s gaze and frowned uncertainly.

“Yes, Dingo?” With a questioning look, Thunder carefully stepped toward him and paused in front of him, his eyes gleaming with wonder.

Frowning, Dingo took a step toward him and leaned closer to him, dropping his voice to a low murmur. “Do me a favor. Walk around the camp for a bit and check on the dingoes with the worst injuries. Make sure everyone is recovering and that no one has been wounded too gravely. If anyone seems to be in bad condition, come get me.”

Thunder nodded quickly. “Of course.” Without another word, he turned around and hastily darted back into the camp where the dingoes had already spread out to return to what they had been doing. In a flash, he bounded toward the closest group of canines to begin checking them over.

Dingo stared after his Second in Command for a long moment with a dark, unreadable expression. At the sound of paw steps behind him, he shook himself out of his daze and looked up quickly, hiding the tension in his expression. Following his gaze, Saderia looked up just in time to see Dash cautiously step up behind her and Dingo, his amber eyes narrowed in a dark, guarded scowl. Loki padded along close behind him, while Maeta tensely followed, her worried brown eyes darting around the camp and searching for any sign of trouble. Tawny and Bunny walked side by side just in front of the leopard leader’s paws, seeming quiet for once.

When Dingo looked up to meet them, Maeta turned around and narrowed her eyes with a worried frown. “Those other dingoes are gone, aren’t they? Are things safe now?”

Dingo let out a soft sigh and nodded. “Yes, they’re gone. Those were Rock’s old followers—the dingoes we fought against in the war who ran off when Rock was killed. I’m sorry you had to be here when they attacked. I was almost certain that they wouldn’t attack anytime soon—it’s only happened once before and with less forces then than now—but I guess I was wrong. I’m sorry if I put any of you in danger.”

Maeta quickly shook her head with a long, relieved sigh. “No, it’s all right. We’re all fine. None of us were hurt.”

“Good.” Dingo managed a weak smile and let out a quiet breath. “Would you like me to take you back to the forest, or did you want to stay here?”

Maeta managed a faint smile. “We’ll stay, if it’s all right with you. I think tearing these two away from each other now would be more difficult than fighting off those dingoes,” she added with a warm nod at the two young animals standing at her paws.

Dingo smiled back and dipped his head. “Very well. In that case, welcome to the camp.” He paused and started to say more, then broke off when a soft gasp of relief sounded behind him. Blinking in surprise, Dingo looked back just in time to see Lightning step out from the crowd of dingoes spreading out through the camp. Relief and gratitude shimmered in the blood-streaked dog’s wide yellow eyes. With wildly bristling fur, he stumbled toward them and smiled when he looked down and saw Bunny standing next to Tawny at Maeta’s paws.

A long, relieved sigh escaped Lightning’s throat and he quickly dipped his head to Maeta. “Thank you for keeping Bunny safe. I was so worried about her.”

Saderia glanced up at the sleek yellow dingo from where she stood at Dingo’s side and smiled. “She was perfectly safe, Lightning. Dingo saved her.”

At her words, Dash looked up with a deep scowl and icily flicked his tail, his voice taking on a hard edge. “And we protected her.”

“I didn’t *need* protecting or saving,” Bunny snapped, shooting them both a cold glance and sharply flicking her tail. Even as she lifted her head with a haughty air, though, she shot Dingo a grateful glance out of the corner of her eye. Without another word, the tiny black pup darted away from Maeta’s paws and bounded off into camp. With a shrill squeal, Tawny hastily bounded after her. Letting a warm smile cross his face, Lightning dipped his head to Saderia and her friends once more, then turned to follow the two cubs. Maeta quickly stepped after him. In just a few seconds, the two young animals and their caretakers disappeared behind the crowd of dingoes into the wide camp, leaving Saderia, Dash, Dingo, and Loki standing alone on the outskirts of camp.

Saderia gazed after the four animals for a split second of silence, then looked back at her friends. Instantly, her eyes snapped toward Loki and Dash and her heart skipped with hope when she saw them staring after Maeta, Lightning, and their young kin instead of looking at her and Dingo. This was her chance. Feeling her heart beat faster, she hesitated, then quickly leaned closer to Dingo. Before he could turn to look at her, she dropped her voice to a whisper and hissed in his ear as softly as she could. “I need to talk to you.”

Dingo glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, a glimmer of understanding lighting up his gaze. Catching her eye, he gave her a tiny, almost unnoticeable nod, then looked back at Loki and Dash. Sensing that she wanted a more private conversation, he flicked his tail and dropped his voice to a soft, nearly inaudible whisper. "I'll wait by my den." When Saderia nodded back, Dingo glanced at Dash and Loki and flicked his tail, giving them a faint smile and raising his voice to a louder, more normal tone. "Well, I'm going to go get a drink of water and check on some of the dingoes. I'll see you guys in a little bit."

While Dash just nodded darkly and Loki held up a paw to wave goodbye, Dingo nodded to them and turned around to walk away. After giving Saderia a secret look, he slowly turned to slink back into camp, heading in the direction of his large den. Narrowing her eyes, Saderia watched him for a tense beat of silence, then looked back at her friends, forcing herself to squeeze up a hopeful smile. "Dash?" When the dark lion looked up at her, she nodded to Loki and forced up a smile. "Why don't you show Loki around the dingo camp? I want to...check in on something."

Dash blinked several times, then slowly narrowed his eyes, as if wondering what she wanted to check in on. At the same time, Loki glanced back at her and started to protest that she didn't need to be shown around, then paused. Seeing the look on Saderia's face, she hesitated, then gave her a knowing nod and turned to look back at Dash with a faint smile. "Yeah, come on, Dash. Let's look around. After you show me around, we can see where Maeta and Tawny have gone."

Dash blinked in shock and opened his mouth to protest, then broke off when he saw the looks on Saderia and Loki's faces. With a deep frown, he hesitated for a long moment, then let out a weary sigh and simply nodded. Without a word, he flicked his tail to Loki to signal for her to follow, then turned to trudge off into the dingo camp, giving Saderia one last lingering glance out of the corner of his eye. Leading Loki along beside him, Dash padded off toward the center of camp to show her around. Side by side, the two walked off into the crowd of dingoes surrounding the center of camp and vanished from sight.

Saderia's heart lurched the instant they disappeared. For a long moment, she watched the spot where they had vanished until she was sure she couldn't see them any longer. As soon as she knew they wouldn't see

her, she took a deep breath and hastily rose to her paws to bound into camp. Darting quickly past hordes of murmuring canines, she moved past the dens on the left side of camp, barely sparing a glance at her surroundings. Her eyes locked on the tall Leader and Second in Command dens at the back of the camp and a hopeful smile crossed her face when they remained the same. Out of the heat of battle, she only saw Dingo's den, not Rock's.

As fast as she could without seeming odd, she darted across the sandy camp and slowed down only when she stepped out in front of the tall Leader's den. Without a second glance back at the camp, she instantly ducked around the rocky entrance of the den peeking out from beneath the dune and padded around the huge hill of sand. When she stepped out behind the sand dune sheltering Dingo's den, leaving the chatter of the camp behind, she looked up with a smile, then felt her heart skip when she saw no one there. Feeling an irrational pang of alarm, she instantly whipped around to search for Dingo, her heart beating faster.

Just when she started to call out for him, the sound of paw steps floated over to her ears. With a quiet gasp, she whipped around to face the side of the tall sand dune den just in time to see Dingo lope out from around the den, licking drops of water off his muzzle. Saderia's eyes widened in surprise, then narrowed with relief at the sight of him.

Catching her eye, he grinned and padded to a stop just in front of her, then sat back on the sand, flicking a few drops of water off his raw shoulders where he must have cleaned out his wounds. Seeing the look on her face, he just smiled and gave her a sheepish shrug. "Sorry, I just wanted a drink of water. I thought it would take you longer to get rid of Dash."

Saderia blinked in surprise. "Why's that?"

Dingo just shrugged and carelessly flicked his tail. "I don't know. He just seems to be acting a little...odd lately."

Saderia's eyes widened and her heart skipped a beat. Dingo had noticed it, too? Trying to shake off her tense thoughts, she narrowed her eyes and opened her mouth to voice her worries, then paused. Feeling a prickle of discomfort, she cast a glance back at the side of the dune sheltering them from view, wondering if the dingoes in the camp could still hear them.

Following her gaze, Dingo narrowed his eyes and lightly flicked his tail, seeming to read exactly what was on her mind. "They can't hear us

talking, Saderia. They don't know we're out here, and they're too busy talking about the battle. If we screamed our whole conversation, they still probably wouldn't be able to make out the words."

Saderia let out a soft sigh and nodded, feeling a wave of relief wash over her. "All right. That's good to know."

Dingo nodded slowly. Wrapping his tail carefully around his paws, he leaned back to face her and studied her with curious, wondering brown eyes. "So...what's going on?"

Saderia narrowed her eyes and hesitated for a moment, wondering how to begin. After struggling to figure out a way to voice her worries, she let out a sigh and decided to just cut to the chase. "I think I'm losing my mind."

Dingo cracked a grin and chuckled. "You came to the right animal then."

Saderia gave him a look. "It's not your kind of insane."

Dingo raised an eyebrow. "I have my own kind of insane?"

She rolled her eyes and sighed. "You know what I mean."

"If you say so." Dingo chuckled, then let out a soft breath, seeming to sense her unease. Giving her a gentler, more serious smile, he flicked his tail and just sighed. "So what is bothering you, Saderia? You do seem to be acting a little strange lately." He paused, then frowned. "Nothing bad has happened, right?"

Saderia quickly shook her head and looked away. "No, not really. It's just...well..." She let out a long sigh and looked down to study the ground, her fur prickling with discomfort. Feeling a pang of embarrassment and unease, she closed her eyes and shook her head. "Never mind. I...I don't want to bother you. It seems so stupid and trivial, especially compared to what you just had to deal with in that fight..."

"If it's bothering you this much, it's important." Dingo narrowed his eyes with a serious look and rested his tail firmly on her shoulder. "Let me deal with the outcasts. They're gone now, and they probably won't bother us for a while. They're not important. You are. Tell me what's upsetting you."

Saderia let out a long sigh and tensely looked away. "Well... okay..." She hesitated for a long moment, then just closed her eyes and shook her head, lost in thought. "I...I just...Ever since the war with Rock..."

I just haven't been the same. I don't know why, but the war really affected me...badly. I haven't been able to sleep at all...Every time I even try to rest, I have nightmares, and they only seem to be getting worse. And lately...it seems like every time I see something or do something that even remotely reminds me of the war...I get this...flashback of it. But it's not just a flashback or a memory. It's not like I just think about what happened. It's like...the whole world actually transforms into the scene I'm remembering. Like...the other day, I was with Loki and Dash, and we climbed to the top of this rock formation out in the forest. It didn't look anything like Rock's den, but I accidentally stumbled and fell on my way down from it, and when I looked up, it looked *exactly* like Rock's den. In that moment, I swore I was in the desert. I even thought Rock was still alive and standing on top of the den, waiting for me. It was...creepy. It terrified me."

She let out a long sigh and narrowed her eyes at the ground, her heart beating faster at the memories. "I don't know what's wrong with me. I mean...my memories of the war usually don't bother me too much, but lately, it's been getting really creepy. Every time I turn around, I see the war all around me, and I can't seem to get a good night's sleep...ever. Do you kind of understand what I mean?"

To her surprise, when she looked up, Dingo gave her a dark nod, his eyes grim and shadowed. "Yes, I do." With a weary sigh, he slowly looked away and gazed out at the desert around him, his eyes dull and lost in thought and his voice soft and tense. "I know what you mean about the nightmares and how they can wear you down. I've dealt with them before, and I know how real and horrifying they can be. After Claw died, I didn't get a single night's sleep without nightmares for just about an entire year. I still have them now and then. And as you could probably see back when I first met you, they didn't exactly do wonders for my health and stability. Hence the reason everyone—including me—thinks I'm insane. As for the flashbacks..." His eyes narrowed and a dark shadow flitted across his face. His voice dropped to a lower, softer tone. "I had those, too. Or something similar, I suppose. They didn't last too long, but I remember that in the first few weeks or months after Claw died...I kept seeing things. I don't know if they were exactly like your flashbacks—mine weren't quite as terrifying, I suppose—but nonetheless, they still disturbed me."

Saderia's eyes narrowed with wonder and sympathy and her voice dropped to a soft whisper. "What kind of flashbacks?"

Dingo shrugged carelessly, though his eyes remained dark and distant. An oddly hollow look crossed his face as he gazed out at the desert, as if he could see the memories of his past playing out on the horizon. "The first few months after Claw's death...I would walk out of my den in the morning and see Claw standing in front of me, taking a drink of water from the trough or talking to one of the dingoes. That might not seem so horrible at first, but she was dead, and that...cold, sinking feeling I got the split second after I realized that was indescribable. Especially when I could still see her even after I realized that. The thing that terrified me the most about those moments—those 'visions' or whatever you want to call them—was that they were so real. It wasn't just like a fleeting thought in the back of my mind. I could actually see it right in front of me, and it didn't immediately go away when I realized it was wrong. Or at least that's what I remember." He paused, then gave her a curious glance. "Is that sort of like what your 'visions' are like?"

Saderia blinked in surprise, then nodded numbly without saying a word. After knowing Dingo for so long, she was surprised she had never known that.

Dingo managed a wry smile. "I guess it is my kind of insane then." When Saderia looked away in embarrassment, he let out a quiet breath and gazed back out at the desert, his expression fading back into seriousness. "I suppose having those visions is just something that happens to someone sometimes after a really traumatic event. I don't know how to stop it, though. Like I said...for me, I endured it for months and the nightmares for practically a whole year, and I know you don't want it to be the same way for you. The only thing I can suggest is to try to just remind yourself that it isn't real whenever you have one of those flashbacks."

Saderia frowned and looked down with a tense, nervous flick of her tail. "I tried that. I even tried reciting facts to myself to make myself snap back to reality...like the fact that the war is over and Rock is dead..."

Dingo frowned and flattened his ears. "Well, that would be the next thing I would suggest—to give yourself details to draw yourself out of it. But if that's not working..." He paused and narrowed his eyes in thought, then gave her a wondering glance. "Maybe instead of telling yourself things

about the war—like the fact that it's over and Rock's gone—try telling yourself more mundane things. Saying things about the war when you're having visions of it probably just reminds you of it more. Try telling yourself more normal things like...I don't know. 'My name is Saderia. I live in the forest. I go to school...'"

"My parents are the King and Queen?" Saderia jumped in, pricking up her ears and catching on to what he meant.

Dingo bit his lip and looked away with a shake of his head. "Maybe you should stay away from that. You might not want to remind yourself of your parents. After all, your mother was involved in the war."

Saderia winced and looked away. "Good idea. So...what else should I add to that?"

Dingo frowned and narrowed his eyes in thought, then just shrugged and gazed thoughtfully out at the desert. "How about something simple like... 'My name is Saderia. I live in the forest. I go to school. I have friends named Dash, Dingo, and Jeb. The sky is blue. The grass is green. The forest is calm. I'm calm.' Just try telling yourself normal, mundane things like that that don't remind you of the war. Hopefully, it'll bring you back to reality."

Saderia blinked several times in surprise, then slowly looked down at her paws, her mind spinning with hope. "That...That might actually work. I'll try it."

Dingo nodded, then cast her a curious glance, his eyes flashing with knowing and curiosity. "Have you told Dash how you've been feeling lately?"

At the mention of Dash's name, Saderia winced without even realizing it and abruptly looked away, seeming to take a sudden interest in her paws. Her fur prickled with discomfort.

Dingo raised an eyebrow, reading the tension in her expression. "I'll take that as a no." When Saderia flinched and looked away, he let out a soft sigh and rested his paw gently on her shoulder. "Something that might help you is talking about how you're feeling when you're not having a flashback. If you get these feelings off your chest, you'll feel better. It might be hard to talk about these things, at first, but if you just get them out and talk about them, they won't scare you as much anymore. Kind of a 'confront your fears' sort of thing."

Saderia let out a weary breath. "I suppose, but..." With a wince and an uncomfortable sigh, she trailed off and stared down at her paws, her eyes clouding with regret.

Dingo's eyes flashed knowingly. "You don't want to talk to Dash for some reason?" When Saderia winced and gave him a miserable nod, he tipped his head to the side and faced her with curious brown eyes. "Why don't you want to talk to Dash? You don't seem to have a problem talking to me."

Saderia frowned and nervously looked away. Biting her lip, she hesitated for a long moment, uncertain of what to say or whether to say anything at all. After a tense moment of silence, she let out a weary sigh and turned to look down at her paws with dark amber eyes. "It's... complicated. In the war...some things happened between me and Dash that...created a lot of problems. It's kind of hard to talk to him now. Actually...it's kind of hard to even trust him sometimes."

Dingo blinked in surprise and narrowed his eyes in bewilderment. "Why?"

Saderia narrowed her eyes and looked up at him with a tense frown. For a long moment, she remained silent, debating whether or not she should tell him the truth. After several tense beats of silence, she breathed out a long, tired breath and lowered her head in defeat. Whether it was right or wrong to tell him, she knew that if she ever wanted to feel normal again, she had to. Taking a deep breath, she hesitated for a second longer, then squeezed her eyes shut and made herself speak up in a soft, tense voice. "During the war...Dash was talking to Dastarius..."

Dingo tipped his head to the side in confusion. "Who's Dastarius?"

Saderia sighed and looked away. "Remember those stories I told you when I first met you? About that lion who captured my parents and held them hostage for ten years? About...who Dash's father is?"

Dingo blinked several times, then gaped at her in disbelief, his eyes growing wide with shock. "No way..." Shaking his head in disbelief, he stared at her with wide eyes, seeming stunned by the realization. "Dastarius is Dash's father, the guy who tried to kill you...right? How...How did Dash talk to him? Didn't you say he was dead?"

Slowly, Saderia nodded without saying a word.

Dingo stared at her in bewilderment for a heartbeat of silence, then stepped back in a sudden flash of shock, his eyes growing as wide as saucers as realization sunk in. “No way...You mean...?”

“Dastarius is a ghost,” Saderia muttered, lowering her eyes to the ground and trying not to wince. “Dash talked to him the same way I talk to Claw.”

“What? When? Why? What...?” Dingo shook his head wildly in bewilderment, his light brown eyes wide with surprise and disbelief. “What exactly has been going on?”

Saderia took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “It’s a long story, and if I tell you what happened, you have to promise me you won’t tell anyone. Especially not Dash... Not yet...”

Dingo hesitated for a split second of silence, then slowly narrowed his eyes and nodded, his stunned expression fading into seriousness. “I promise,” he murmured, his voice soft and firm. “Tell me everything.”

Dash fought the urge to mutter under his breath as he stalked through the crowded dingo camp after Loki. After a while, she had ended up leading him through the camp instead of the other way around. Keeping his eyes locked on the ground, he only bothered to look up when Loki stopped in front of him. With a faint frown, he padded to a halt behind her and looked up to see Maeta and Lightning standing in front of him. The leopard and the dingo stood side by side, staring down at the two young animals before them with warm smiles.

In front of their guardians, Tawny and Bunny tumbled across the sand, wrestling to pin the other down and letting out bright, playful squeaks. Their chocolate brown and amber eyes glimmered with excitement as they struggled to gain the upper hand while their caretakers looked on with playful smiles and shakes of their heads.

With a bright grin, Loki stepped forward to sit beside Maeta and watch the two young animals play, flicking her tail at Dash to signal for him to follow her. Dash hesitated for a second, then slowly stepped forward and sat down beside Loki to watch the young cub and pup play since he didn’t particularly have anything better to do. To his surprise, when he looked up, he saw Rip sitting a few paces away on the other side of the wrestling animals, watching them with a playful grin and an eagerly flicking tail.

Ignoring Tawny's bright squeal of indignation, Bunny suddenly rolled her over and pinned her to the ground with a wide grin. Her amber eyes glimmered with excitement and she let out a bright squeak of triumph. "Got you! I win!" With a sneer, she glanced back over her shoulder at Rip and flicked her tail. "Score one for the dingoes!"

"All right!" With a wide grin, Rip leaned down and ran his paw through the sand to make some sort of mark. Dash's eyes widened in surprise as he made the odd marking. For the first time, he realized that Rip had drawn some sort of scorecard in the sand with one box beneath a crude picture of a spotted leopard face and one box beneath a rough drawing of a completely shaded-in dingo face. Each one had a few tally marks beneath the drawings.

Seeing Rip's wide grin, Lightning raised an eyebrow at him and just rolled his eyes. "You never did grow up, did you?"

Rip chuckled and looked up with a grin. "Oh, was I supposed to?"

Lightning just shook his head and tried to hide a smile.

Pricking up her ears, Loki hid a grin and peered down at the two young animals with shining green eyes. "What are you guys playing?"

Bunny leapt off of Tawny in a flash and turned to look up at her with flashing eyes and a wide grin. "Dingoes vs. Forest Food!"

While eyebrows shot up around the crowd of forest animals surrounding Lightning, Tawny leapt to her paws with a bright, excited squeal and gazed up at them with shining brown eyes. "Yeah, it's fun!" she exclaimed. "Bunny just thought of it today!"

Lightning rolled his eyes and shook his head with a wry, playful smile. "They actually talked Rip into keeping score of who won the most."

"The dingoes are winning three to two!" Rip exclaimed, grinning a wide grin and lashing his tail excitedly across the sand.

Dash raised an eyebrow and just shook his head slowly at Rip. Around him, the others did the same.

Not noticing their reactions, Bunny and Tawny leapt toward each other to begin their game again, letting out bright, playful squeaks. Kicking and pushing at each other with eager laughs, the two young animals tumbled across the ground, trying to get the upper hand. With a wild squeal, Tawny rolled Bunny around and pinned her down against the sand. As soon

as Bunny's back touched the ground, the tiny leopard cub practically jumped up with a squeal and a wide smile. "I did it! I won!"

Bunny scowled at her and let out a low growl. Pushing Tawny away from her, she stumbled to her paws and shot the cub a glare with a glint in her eye that looked almost angry. Just as soon as the anger flitted across her gaze, though, it vanished and a playful grin crossed her face instead. "You did not! You can't beat me! You're forest food!"

"I can so!" Tawny flicked her playfully with her tail, then turned around to look at Rip with shining brown eyes. "Score one for the forest food!"

"Aw, man..." Even as he grinned from ear to ear, Rip groaned and pretended to make the tally mark more reluctantly, as if resenting it the whole time. "Do I have to?"

"Yes!" With an excited squeal and a wild lash of her tail, Tawny turned around to face Bunny and grinned. "I beat you! I beat you!"

Bunny rolled her eyes at her. "You did not. Nobody can beat me!" A faint grin twitched at the corners of her mouth. "I *am* going to be Leader one day, after all!"

While Tawny just shrugged and conceded, Rip looked up and burst out laughing. "You? Leader of the pack?" Snickering to himself, he leered down at Bunny and shook his head in amusement. "In your dreams!"

Bunny whipped around and shot him an icy glare. "When you're bowing down to me as your Leader, I'm going to make you eat those words, Rip!"

Rip snickered and rolled his eyes. "Like that'll happen! Bunnies can't be Leaders!"

Bunny shot him an indignant glare and lashed her tail. "I'm not a bunny, it's just my stupid name! I hate my name," she added with a low growl under her breath and an annoyed roll of her eyes.

"Why?" Rip taunted, giving her a wide sneer. "It's so *cute!*"

"That's why I hate it," Bunny snapped, shooting him a furious glare and baring her fangs in annoyance. "I'm not a bunny!"

Rip chuckled and raised an eyebrow. "Well, if we follow that logic, then Dingo's not a dingo."

Tawny blinked and tipped her head to the side in confusion. "I thought Dingo was a dingo."

Bunny let out an annoyed sigh and rolled her eyes. “You’re hopeless, Rip. Tawny, ignore him.”

Tawny looked up at her in surprise, then just shrugged and frowned, her brown eyes still narrowed with confusion. “Okay...”

“Anyway...” Ignoring Tawny’s bewildered gaze and shooting Rip a cold glare, Bunny flicked her tail and stuck her nose up in the air with a cool scowl. “I *am* going to be Leader one day! You’ll see!”

Rip just snickered and grinned. “Yeah, right. Like I said, bunnies can’t be Leaders.”

“I’m not a—” Bunny broke off with a grating, annoyed sigh and shook her head. Flattening her ears, she shot Rip a withering glare and just rolled her eyes. “Never mind. I am going to be Leader, though. All you’re doing is proving it. After all, you thought Dingo would never be Leader, and now he is. All he had to do was kill Rock.”

While Rip just chuckled and shrugged, Lightning frowned, a dark shadow of worry crossing his face. Narrowing his eyes, the sleek yellow dingo whipped around to look at Bunny and nervously flicked his tail, his face dark with bewilderment and concern. “Wait a minute...Bunny, how did you know Dingo killed Rock?” He paused, then looked up at Rip with a frown. “Did you tell her?”

Rip blinked in surprise, then just shrugged and shook his head. “No, I didn’t tell her.”

Lightning frowned and glanced back at Bunny with bewildered yellow eyes. “How did you know then? Did someone tell you?”

Bunny glanced up at him in surprise, then just shrugged and shook her head. “No, no one told me. I don’t know how I know. It’s not like it’s a secret Rock’s dead. I just figured it must have been Dingo who killed him. It’s not that hard to realize.” While Lightning just shrugged and nodded, dropping his curiosity, Bunny frowned and simply flicked her tail. “I mean, he did kill Bone, after all.”

Lightning blinked in surprise and whipped around to face her in disbelief, his pacified expression fading into shock. “What?” With a deep, tense frown and a worried flick of his tail, he stared down at Bunny and narrowed his eyes in concern. “How do you know Dingo killed Bone? How do you even know who Bone is? He...er...*died* before you were born.”

With a bewildered frown, he sharply looked up at Rip, questioning him with his eyes.

Rip narrowed his eyes and shrugged, a dark shadow flitting across his face. “I didn’t tell her anything. I don’t talk about Bone. Ever.”

Bunny narrowed her eyes in annoyance and testily lashed her tail, giving her older brother a frustrated glare. “I don’t remember *hearing* about it from anyone. I just...know it. I don’t know how I know. I just do.”

While Lightning blinked in surprise and studied her curiously, Rip just shrugged and lightly flicked his tail. “She probably heard it from someone sometime and just doesn’t remember it. Like when she was first born. She probably heard someone say something about it then. After all, she *was* born right after Bone died, and everyone was talking about it then. It was kind of a big event, you know.”

Dash blinked and looked up in surprise. “*When* was Bunny born?”

Rip shrugged and uncomfortably looked down at his paws. “About an hour or so after Bone...er...died...Probably less than that. Right after we, uh, dragged him back into camp, Lightning’s mother started having her. It kind of freaked us out, actually.”

While Dash frowned, Bunny just rolled her eyes at them. “You guys are so annoying. Why don’t you think I know it just because I’m smart?”

Rip let out a wild, hyena-like laugh and rolled his eyes. “Well, I ruled that theory out right off the bat!”

Bunny bared her fangs in a growl and shot him a furious glare. “You’re such a jerk! I’m out of here! Come on, Tawny.” Giving her leopard friend a sharp flick of her tail, she turned and darted away from them in a quick streak of black. With Tawny racing frantically after her, the tiny pup darted across the camp and dove into the shadows of a den just a few paces away from them—one Dash guessed must be her and Lightning’s den. With a hasty squeak, Tawny quickly darted after her and disappeared into the shadows.

Lightning shook his head and raised an eyebrow at Rip. “Rip, must you always antagonize her? You know how easily she gets mad.”

Rip just grinned and chuckled. “What can I say? It’s fun!”

Lightning just rolled his eyes and tried to hide a smile. “Whatever. Let’s just let them play alone together for a while. I’m sure they’ll be fine.”

Bunny stared out through the shadows of the den at the camp before her, a dark frown on her face. Narrowing her eyes, she watched as her older brother and the other animals slowly split up and wandered away to explore the rest of the camp. A shadow flitted across her face. After a long moment of hesitation, she slowly tore her gaze away from the entrance of the dark, tiny den and turned to look back at Tawny with oddly dark amber eyes.

Tawny grinned when she caught Bunny's eye, then paused and frowned in confusion when she saw the seriousness in her gaze. "What's the matter?"

Bunny scowled and glanced back over her shoulder at the camp beyond the den, then looked back at her friend with narrowed eyes. "Do you think I'm weird?"

Tawny blinked several times and looked down at her paws. "Um..."

Bunny sighed and looked away with a roll of her eyes. "Never mind. Don't answer that."

While Bunny turned away to stare back out at the camp with narrowed, glinting amber eyes, Tawny frowned and tipped her head to the side in bewilderment. "Is this about what those guys were talking about? What was that about anyway?"

Bunny narrowed her eyes and frowned, then slowly turned around to face her, an almost uneasy glint in her eyes. "I don't know. It's just...I have this strange feeling that something's wrong with me." When Tawny blinked and tipped her head to the side in confusion, Bunny looked back out at the camp and frowned. "What Lightning and Rip said...the other dingoes do that all the time. Whenever I say something about the past, they always seem surprised and ask me how I know what I just told them. And I don't actually know how I know it. Nobody told me. No one's ever told me anything about the past—like before I was born or even stuff about the war—but I still feel like I know all about it. It's weird. It's like I have this idea of what the past is like without even knowing where it came from—like I just imagined it or something—but then when I talk about it in front of the other dingoes, they tell me it's actually true—that what I imagined actually happened."

Tawny blinked in confusion and frowned, seeming not to understand. "I guess that is weird. Does it really matter, though?"

Bunny just sighed and turned to look back out at the camp with narrowed, guarded eyes. “I guess not. Whatever. Can we put a hold on the silly games for a while? I think I see the forest Princess behind Dingo’s den, and I want to keep an eye on her and see how she acts when she comes back from her chat with him. There’s something strange about her. Plus, I’m kind of curious as to how she’s dealing with the fact that her friend almost betrayed her.”

Tawny blinked several times in bewilderment. “What? What are you talking about?”

Bunny frowned and glanced back at her in confusion. “During the battle,” she explained. “When Princess Saderia was dangling from Rock’s ledge and Dash didn’t help her.”

Tawny’s eyes widened and her mouth gaped open in shock. “I never knew that! We were never even in the battle! How do you know that?”

Bunny blinked several times in surprise, then slowly turned to stare back out at the camp with a deep frown, her amber eyes growing clouded and far away. “I don’t know...” She hesitated, then narrowed her eyes and tensely lashed her tail through the shadows. “But this is exactly what I was talking about.”

Dash stalked listlessly through the dingo camp on his own, his tail twitching tensely back and forth with annoyance. Out of the corner of his eye, he glanced around at the camp to see if he could see Saderia yet. Of course he couldn’t, since she was still with Dingo. His heart burned with frustration. Why was it taking them so long to get back? And what were they talking about that was so secret they couldn’t discuss it in front of anyone else? Dash’s blood boiled with bitterness and anger. *He* used to be the one Saderia talked to, not Dingo. *He* was supposed to be her best friend, *not* Dingo. Dingo didn’t deserve to be her best friend. Dash had known her way longer than Dingo had and liked her a lot more than he ever could.

With a long, weary sigh, Dash gazed around at the camp with shadowed amber eyes, looking for something even mildly entertaining to distract himself with. Bunny and Tawny remained hidden inside Lightning’s den, providing no helpful distractions. Although, when he looked close enough, he could just see Bunny’s cold, creepy amber eyes glittering through the shadows, empty of any rational emotion. A shiver raced down

his spine and he promptly turned away, not wanting to look. He tried to avoid looking at her creepy eyes because Bunny was creepy, and that was all there was to it. One minute, she was acting like a typical light-hearted pup, and the next minute, she was talking in that strange, cocky way of hers that made her seem a lot older than she was. Normal pups didn't do that, at least as far as he knew. Normal pups didn't speak as though they were ten times older than they actually were. Normal pups didn't smirk and say things like, 'You have blood in your claws.'

Of course, maybe it was just a dingo thing to be creepy. It was a bit odd how Bunny acted and how she seemed to know something all of the dingoes swore they had never told her, but Dash was beginning to realize that almost all dingoes were odd. Especially friend-stealing ones with brown fur and light brown eyes.

Dash gazed out at the camp with dull amber eyes and let out a long sigh. When was Saderia going to be back?

"All of *that* happened?" Dingo gaped at Saderia in shock, his expression stunned and his eyes wide with disbelief.

Saderia nodded nervously and shifted uncomfortably in place, her heart beating faster as she faced his stunned expression. Just seconds ago, she had finished telling Dingo everything that had happened between Dash and Dastarius during the war. Part of her almost felt bad for revealing everything to Dingo without talking to Dash first, but another part of her felt relieved to have finally gotten it off her chest. At least she didn't have to keep it to herself anymore...

For a long moment, Dingo stared at her in shock, taking in everything she had told him. After several tense beats of silence, he blinked once and looked down at his paws. Slowly, he shook his head and just snorted, his light brown eyes wide with disbelief. "Wow...I feel so uninformed..."

Saderia flattened her ears and guiltily looked away. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you until now."

Dingo shook his head and waved her worries away with a flick of his tail, taking on a more serious expression. "It's all right. I kind of understand why things have been so difficult for you now. Somehow I

doubt the war would have affected you this much if you didn't feel like it caused you to lose your best friend."

A flash of pain sliced across Saderia's heart at hearing her own secret thoughts repeated to her. Hiding a wince, she frowned and tensely flicked her tail. "You really think that's the reason I'm so upset about the war?"

"Among other things." Dingo narrowed his eyes with a knowing frown. "The war was bad enough on its own—I've had plenty of nightmares about it over the past month. But add to that the fact that your own mother was involved, and it becomes ten times worse. Add to *that* the fact that Dash almost seemed to betray you, and it becomes unbearable. There's something I've noticed about you, Saderia. If someone threatens or hurts you, you bounce back pretty quickly. But if someone or something threatens someone you care about or upsets the balance between you and your friends, it's harder for you to recover."

Saderia winced and let out a long sigh, avoiding his eyes. She had realized that, too. After a long moment of silence, she took a deep breath and slowly looked up to meet his eyes with a dull, weary gaze. "So what do you think? Should I trust Dash...or not?"

Dingo let out a soft sigh. "You know I can't answer that, Saderia. Honestly, I can't imagine a world where Dash would ever push you off a ledge or turn his back on you if you needed his help, but I also realize that this Dastarius guy must have really messed up his mind. While I highly doubt Dash is secretly plotting to kill you or anything like that...I would advise you to not immediately try to jump back to trusting him again. It's not even really because of him. I just don't think you should try to instantly force yourself to trust him again because you're not ready to do that and it would only upset you and confuse you. My best advice would be to try to just...ease back into being friends again. Try talking to him about your nightmares or something and see if he tries to comfort you the way he used to. Just start with little things like that. And if you ever need my help or if you want me to say something to him, you can always come to me." He paused, then let out a long sigh and looked away, his eyes clouding with guilt. "Now that I know what's bothering you, I wish I could be back in the forest so I could help you out. I know it's hard feeling alone."

Saderia let out a quiet breath, but felt a faint, hopeful smile cross her face. In her heart, she knew talking to Dingo had been the right thing to do—he was the only one who truly seemed to understand. “It’s okay, Dingo.” She flicked her tail to wave away his worries. “You have duties here in the pack now that you’re the Leader of the desert. You belong here. I’m glad you finally get to be here to help the others.” She paused, then tipped her head to the side with a hopeful look. “I *was* wondering, though...Could I spend the night here with the others? My parents and Loki’s parents are okay with it.”

Dingo nodded with a faint smile. “Of course. You and whoever else you can fit in there can sleep in my den if you like. I can just sleep out under the stars or else take over for one of the guards.”

Saderia quickly shook her head. “No, I can sleep out under the stars with Dash and the others. It’ll be like old times.”

A warm grin twitched at the corners of Dingo’s mouth. “All right then. I’ll join you all the same.” He paused and glanced back over his shoulder at the camp behind her, then turned back to face her with a warm smile. “Are you ready to go back to camp to join the others, or do you want to stay and talk about anything else?”

Saderia glanced back at the camp and shook her head. “No, I’m fine.” She paused, then looked back at him and managed a weak, grateful smile. “Thanks for talking to me, though. It did help.”

Dingo flicked his tail to wave away her thanks. “It was my pleasure. You talked to me when I was down, and that saved my life. It’s about time I got to return the favor.”

Dash looked up quickly when his eyes caught a splash of orange near the Leader’s den at the back of camp. The instant he lifted his head, his eyes snapped toward the tall den and narrowed when he realized what he had seen. Without a sound, Saderia slipped out from behind the Leader’s den just in front of him and turned to pad back into camp with Dingo close beside her. Annoyance flashed through Dash’s mind at the sight. Would it kill him to walk just one millimeter farther away from her? Biting back a growl, he glanced up at Saderia and felt his heart sink with dismay when he saw the smile on her face. When he looked closer, he could practically read the gratitude in her eyes when she glanced at Dingo. Dash’s heart skipped

with shock, then boiled with anger. Why couldn't she ever look at him that way anymore?

The instant the thought crossed his mind, Dingo lifted his head and turned to look straight at him. For a split second, their eyes locked. While Dash stared at him in surprise, Dingo gazed back at him with cool, narrowed eyes that Dash couldn't read. Subconsciously, Dash frowned and shook his messy dark brown mane out over his face, trying to hide his expression. Even as he did, his heart skipped with unease. There was something a little too knowing in Dingo's light brown gaze. Had Saderia *told* him what had happened during the war? Had he already known? Dash's heart skipped with dismay, then started to race with a new sense of panic. What if he did know? What if during his little 'talk' with Saderia, he had told her not to trust him? What if he had told her he was *dangerous*?

Dash openly glared at Dingo as he padded toward him with Saderia close beside him. He didn't know what Dingo knew, what he thought, or what he might have said, but if that dog started acting more protective of Saderia around him, he was going to lose it.

When Dingo and Saderia padded to a stop just in front of him, Dash narrowed his eyes and irritably flicked his tail. Trying to keep the annoyance out of his tone and keep his voice as calm as possible, he looked back and forth between them and coolly raised his eyebrows. "Hi, guys. You sure took a long time to get back. Did you have a nice...talk?"

Dingo glanced down at him and narrowed his eyes at his strained tone. For a tense heartbeat of silence, he studied Dash without a word, then gave him a curt, emotionless nod. "Yes. We did. Thanks for asking."

Saderia cast a quick glance back and forth between Dash and Dingo, then turned to look out at the camp with hopeful amber eyes. "I think I'm going to go find Loki and see if she and Maeta still want to spend the night with Tawny. I'll talk to you guys later." With a cautious frown, she cast one last quick glance at Dash and Dingo, then slowly turned and walked away. Even as she padded away from them, she watched them for a long moment before reluctantly turning away. Breaking out in a run, she bounded across the camp to search for Loki. A second later, she ducked behind a crowd of dingoes and vanished from sight, leaving Dash and Dingo facing each other alone.

As soon as Saderia disappeared, Dingo glanced back at Dash and coolly flicked his tail, his voice light and mild...almost too much so. "So where would you like to sleep tonight, Dash? Saderia wants to sleep out under the stars. Is that okay with you?"

Dash glared at him. He knew something. He could just tell. "I don't think we *should* spend the night." When Dingo raised his eyebrows, Dash narrowed his eyes and sharply flicked his tail, allowing a drop of venom to slip into his voice. "After that attack, don't you think it's a little...dangerous to let Saderia spend the night here? You wouldn't want her to get hurt, would you?"

Dingo raised an eyebrow and gave him a mild look, unruffled by his cold tone. "It was her idea, not mine. Besides, no one was too badly hurt during the fight, and those outcasts are not going to be back soon after that defeat. And in any case, I'll have guards posted all around the camp. I'll even keep watch myself to make sure nothing happens while you two are sleeping."

Dash narrowed his eyes, feeling an icy jolt of irritation shoot through him. Struggling to keep his tone even, he narrowed his eyes and dropped his voice to a growl. "I'm *sure* you must be exhausted from all the work you've done. How about *I* keep watch?"

Dingo let out a knowing chuckle and shook his head. "No, Dash, you don't have to do that. I can keep watch. The whole point is to make her feel safe, after all."

Chapter Nine

Jealousy

Dash's tail twitched restlessly across the shadowy brown sand in the center of camp. Shaking his dark mane out over his eyes to block out the silvery light of the moon, he half-heartedly tried to fall asleep. No matter what he did, though, sleep never came. With a weary sigh, he opened his eyes and faintly turned his head to look around. Annoyance shot through him when his gaze instantly flicked to Dingo. The shadowy dog sat just a few paces away with his back turned to him, staring out at the dark horizon past the dens scattered around the outskirts of the camp. Saderia slept right beside him, twitching tensely in her sleep but otherwise looking oddly peaceful for a change. Dingo's tail rested gently on her paw, seeming to bring her some degree of peace.

Dash glared at the back of Dingo's head, wanting nothing more than to rip off his stupid tail. He couldn't wait until morning when they finally got to leave...

With a muted sigh, he glanced at the dark land behind him to see Loki sleeping soundly beside Maeta next to the water trough while Tawny dozed off with a smile against her aunt's belly. Tearing his eyes off the peaceful cheetah and leopards, he turned to look back at Dingo and Saderia and felt a jolt of pain and sorrow. In that moment, separated from the others, they seemed so close. It was like he didn't even exist.

Everything he had said in his argument with Saderia suddenly flickered back through his mind, making his heart burn with discomfort and guilt. Desperately, he tried to push the thoughts away and squeezed his eyes shut to try to force himself to sleep, even though he felt more awake than ever. After several tense minutes of trying desperately to force himself to rest, he felt ready to scream. Just as he let out a sigh and started to give up, a sudden soft cry split through the air from somewhere just ahead of him.

Instantly, Dash's eyes flew open and his heart skipped. Just in front of him, Saderia twisted and thrashed violently across the desert sand with

her eyes squeezed shut tight and her ears flattened back in fear, as if trapped in some sort of nightmare. Dash's heart skipped and he leapt to his paws to try to help her, but never got the chance. Before he could do anything, Dingo quietly leaned down and pressed a paw against Saderia's shoulder.

With a soft gasp, Saderia jolted awake and snapped her head up to look at Dingo with eyes wide with alarm. Right before Dash's eyes, Dingo leaned down to whisper something to her too quietly for him to hear. When Saderia whispered something back, Dingo just smiled and patted the ground to signal for her to lie back down, brushing her shoulder reassuringly with his paw. With a quiet yawn, Saderia rested her head back down on the ground and closed her eyes. A second later, she had already slipped back into a deep, peaceful sleep, as if nothing had happened.

Dash's heart sank with dismay. He had never been able to get Saderia to calm down that easily. A bitter growl rumbled in his throat when Dingo looked down at her and smiled a kind smile. As if hearing the low sound, Dingo suddenly cut his eyes to the side and met Dash's cold amber gaze. Blinking in surprise, he slowly turned to look up and stare at him with the same air of annoying calmness he always had. Dash glared at him. Tense silence hung between them.

"I hate you," Dash mouthed.

Dingo simply flicked his ears and mouthed something that looked like, "Too bad." Without another word, he turned back to look down at Saderia and lightly brushed her shoulder with his tail, a worried gleam flickering across the calm in his light brown eyes. Feeling hollow, Dash just stared at them, his claws kneading deep into the sand. Looking at the two of them, Dash doubted anyone would ever guess they had *other* friends. It was like he never *had* existed. With the way Dingo was acting, he no longer needed to exist. It seemed Saderia didn't even need other friends.

Biting back a scowl, Dash turned his back on them and promptly closed his eyes, trying to forget the image of them together and telling himself that Dingo would pay for this.

The next morning, Dash groggily blinked open his eyes at the sound of soft conversation, then instantly squeezed them shut again with a wince. Shielding his eyes against the blinding rays of the bright morning sun, he clumsily staggered to his paws and forced his eyes open to look around. All

around the wide camp, several dingoes had already crept out of their dens and spread out, meeting around the water trough or chatting around their dens in hushed voices.

When Dash looked behind him, he saw Loki standing close by the water trough next to Lightning and Maeta. With bright smiles and shining eyes, the three animals spoke in soft voices while Tawny slept soundly at Maeta's side, wrapped up comfortably by the leopard leader's tail. Several feet away from them on the other side of camp, Bunny stood atop one of the small, rocky dens peeking out from under the sand. Rip stood on the ground beside the den with a wide grin on his unkempt red face, talking to Bunny in a soft voice while she snapped back at him, cracking jokes and throwing insults.

Looking away from the happy faces of his friends, Dash turned back to look at the place where Saderia had fallen asleep, expecting to see her talking to Dingo or else still sleeping right beside him. To his surprise, though, the two of them were nowhere in sight. Blinking in surprise, Dash turned to gaze around at the bright desert camp, searching for any sign of them. No matter where he looked, though, he couldn't catch a glimpse of them anywhere in camp. A tense, worried frown crossed his face.

Trying to hide his unease and confusion, he turned back to glance at Loki, Maeta, and Lightning and hesitated, then hastily turned to pad toward them. With a frown and a groggy shake of his head to wake himself up, he stumbled toward Loki and narrowed his eyes. "Loki?"

At the sound of his soft voice, the cheetah turned around to look over her shoulder and smiled when she saw him. "Good morning, Dash," she called, stepping away from her conversation with Maeta and Lightning and giving him a friendly wave.

"Good morning," Dash muttered quickly. With a tense frown, he cast a quick glance at the camp around him, then narrowed his eyes. "Hey, do you know where Dingo and Saderia are? I haven't seen them this morning."

Loki nodded with a shrug and flicked her tail toward the back of camp and the open desert beyond it. "They went out for a walk through the desert a few hours ago while you were still asleep. They told me to tell you where they went if you woke up while they were gone."

“Well, isn’t that nice?” Dash sharply lashed his tail and scowled at her. “Any idea when they’re going to be back?”

Loki opened her mouth to reply, then broke off when something caught her eye. Blinking in surprise, she turned to look over her shoulder at the patch of space in between the Leader and Second in Command dens and the northern rows of smaller dens at the back of camp. A bright smile crossed her face and she quickly flicked her tail in that direction. “They just got back, Dash. They’re over there.”

Dash blinked in surprise and instantly whirled around to face the direction she had indicated, his heart skipping with shock. Just a few feet away from him near the Leader’s den at the back of camp, Dingo and Saderia padded past the small rocky homes into the outskirts of camp, smiling and laughing together with bright amber and brown eyes. Dash’s heart blazed with fury. Muttering a brusque thanks to Loki, he turned to stalk toward his two friends, his tail lashing tensely back and forth. Just as the two animals stepped into camp, Saderia turned to murmur something to Dingo that Dash couldn’t hear. When Dingo nodded, the tiger Princess turned and dashed out into the camp without noticing Dash, heading toward the crowd of Loki, Maeta, and Lightning to join the conversation. With a quick glance in her direction, Dingo smiled to himself and started to step out farther into the camp to join the others.

Dash’s eyes narrowed. Without knowing what he was planning on doing, he hastily stalked toward Dingo and abruptly stepped out in front of him to block his way. When Dash stopped in front of him, blocking him on the very outskirts of camp next to his den, Dingo looked up in surprise. Blinking several times, he tipped his head to the side in confusion and opened his mouth to say something, but never got the chance.

“Who do you think you are?” Before Dingo could say a word, Dash cut him off with a low growl and a dark glare, his tail lashing furiously back and forth.

Dingo blinked in surprise, then raised an eyebrow at him. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Dash narrowed his eyes in a burning glare. “It means I’m sick of you acting like you’re Saderia’s best friend when you’re not! She doesn’t even like you that much!”

Dingo's eyes widened in surprise, then narrowed in a bewildered scowl. "What are you talking about? I am Saderia's friend!" He paused, then frowned and sharply flicked his tail. "And who are you to say how much she likes me? What's your problem?"

"My problem is you!" Dash bared his fangs in a snarl and dug his claws furiously into the sand. "If you would just go away, everything would be fine, but *no*, you have to swoop in here and act like Saderia's best friend! I've got news for you, Dingo—she doesn't even like you! The only reason she's hanging out with you so much now is because she's mad at me!"

"Well, don't you think you're special?" Dingo snorted and raised an eyebrow at him, a scowl twitching at the corners of his mouth. "Where exactly would you like me to go, Dash? Off the end of the Snake Pit?"

"That would be nice," Dash growled with a tense edge to his voice.

Dingo gaped at him in disbelief. "What is your problem? What do you have against me all of a sudden? I haven't done anything to you!"

"No, you've only tried to *steal* my best friend!" Dash snapped back, his voice raising and his tail lashing in a surge of fury.

"This is about Saderia?" Dingo gaped at him in shock and shook his head, his eyes narrowed in a stunned glare. "I haven't tried to steal her or anybody! You're being an idiot!"

"You're the idiot!" Dash gritted his teeth and shot him a withering glare. "Why don't you just back off and stay away from Saderia? Everybody knows the only reason you even *want* to be friends with her is so you can have a replacement Claw!"

Shock flashed in Dingo's eyes, then blazed into anger. With a furious snarl, he leaned in and bared his fangs in Dash's face, his eyes flashing with rage. "You leave my sister out of this, you paranoid creep!"

"And what if I don't?" Dash curled his lip in a cold sneer and leered at Dingo with flashing amber eyes. "What are you going to do—kill me like all those other animals you killed, murderer? I'm sure you'll find some way to cover it up and make everyone think, 'Oh, he's such a great guy! Never mind those two animals he killed! Nobody even remembers that anyway!'"

"Who do you think you are?" Dingo bared his fangs in a snarl and furiously lashed his tail, his eyes blazing with anger. "I killed Bone to save your pathetic life and I killed Rock to save your mother! What do you want me to do—apologize for that?"

“Just forget it,” Dash snarled, narrowing his eyes in a withering glare and digging his claws into the sand. “It doesn’t matter. Just stay away from Saderia!”

“Why?” Dingo shouted, his voice raising to a sharp, furious snarl. “So she can spend the rest of her life scared and miserable while you sit back and pretend like you’re *so sorry* when you *could* be doing something to help her?”

At that point, several dingoes had turned to see what the commotion was about, hearing their raised, snarling voices. Wonder glimmered in their eyes. While some looked around to see where the growls were coming from, others openly stared at them with wide, curious eyes. Whispers spread through the camp. Dash and Dingo barely noticed them.

Dash’s fur bristled and his heart skipped in alarm. “So you do know what happened!” A furious growl rumbled in his throat and his paws trembled with anger. “You’ve been using it against me this whole time, haven’t you?!”

Dingo gaped at him in disbelief. “How paranoid can you get?”

“Just leave us alone!” Dash bared his fangs in a glare and furiously lashed his tail. “All you’re doing is making things worse! If we didn’t come here every weekend to visit *you*, Saderia and I would already be friends again!”

“Oh, so *I’m* the one stopping you from being friends?” Dingo snorted and curled his lip in disgust. “Why not spend your time getting a clue instead of accusing me? Here’s a thought—maybe the reason she doesn’t like you anymore is because you plotted with the one who almost killed her and now do everything you can to ignore her and act like it’s *so unfair* how she doesn’t want to spend time with you even though *you’re* doing the same thing and she’s suffering *way* more than you think you are!”

Dash’s fur bristled and he gritted his teeth in rage. “You don’t know what you’re talking about!” he shouted with a wild, frantic snarl. “And you have no right to judge me! Dastarius was my father, and that’s the *only* reason I listened to him!”

Dingo shook his head in disgust. “So what you’re saying is...it’s completely all right to conspire in secret with a murderer as long as he’s your family?” He curled his lip with a scowl. “My family has its resident

psychopath, too. My brother was a murderer just like your father, but you don't see *me* falling over myself to go plan with him."

Dash gritted his teeth. "That's different! He actually *did* kill someone!"

Dingo raised an eyebrow. "So if your dad had succeeded and Saderia's name was only ever mentioned with a death date beside it, you wouldn't have plotted with him? That's some pretty twisted logic, Dash."

Dash flinched and dug his claws deep into the sand, practically shaking with fury. "All right, stop messing with my mind! It happened, okay...?"

"Yes, it happened," Dingo interrupted, lashing his tail and giving him a long, cold glare. "And now it's over. Move on, get over it, and help Saderia deal with what she's going through instead of sitting back and moping about it all the time. As far as I'm concerned, you don't deserve Saderia's friendship—*not* because you got suckered into Dastarius's plot, but because you refuse to admit your mistakes and make up for them!"

"I did admit them!" Dash snapped through gritted teeth, his claws trembling with anger. "I told her I was sorry for what I did!"

Dingo snorted and rolled his eyes. "A sorry is nothing but empty words if you don't mean it."

"I did mean it!"

"Then prove it!" Dingo whipped around to glare at him with flashing brown eyes, his tail lashing with fury and his teeth gritted in a scowl. "Do something to prove you're actually *worth* being friends with! Ask her about her nightmares, talk about her fears, wake her up when she's having a dream, hold her paw when she's scared, talk to her about the war, talk to her about *anything*, make her laugh, go visit some place together—even a *smile* would be a welcome change!" Dingo narrowed his eyes and dropped his voice to a low growl. "Instead of waiting for Saderia to instantly like you again, why don't you start acting like you actually like *her* first? Instead of trying to bite my head off for trying to help her, why don't you step in and do something for her? Quit wallowing around in your own disgusting self-pity and do something, Dash! Unless you do something, you really will lose Saderia's friendship. And if I have to 'steal' her from you to try to help her recover from all this, I'll do it."

“Oh, quit acting like you’re so much better!” Dash hissed, shooting him a withering glare. “It’s not that easy, you know!”

Dingo snorted and raised an eyebrow. “Why? All you have to do is make a tiny bit of effort.”

“Just shut up and back off!” Dash roared, his fur bristling and his paws shaking with rage. “You don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“Fine!” Dingo snapped, rolling his eyes with an annoyed lash of his tail. “Don’t listen to me. See if I care! Go on sulking for the rest of your life, waiting for Saderia to care about you again. In the meantime, I’m going to go see how she’s doing this morning.” Without another word, he turned to stalk past Dash, shouldering him aside without meeting his gaze. Sharply lashing his tail, he started to storm back into camp, his eyes narrowed and his ears flattened back.

Dash whipped around and glared after him as he stalked away, his fur bristling with rage. Without bothering to think, he gritted his teeth and raised his voice to a wild, furious shout. “You don’t deserve to be a Leader, you disgusting *murderer!*”

Dingo paused and glanced back over his shoulder with a dark scowl and narrowed brown eyes. “And you don’t deserve to be a Prince.” Without another word, he simply flicked his tail and turned to stalk away from him.

Dash gritted his teeth in fury, his heart racing in his chest. Practically shaking with rage, he glared after him for a tense heartbeat of silence, then bared his fangs in a low snarl. “You don’t deserve to be Saderia’s friend, you know!”

“Fascinating,” Dingo replied with a flat, disinterested frown, never once bothering to look back at him as he padded away. “I’m sure I’d love to hear all your stupid reasons why, but I’m a little busy ignoring you right now.”

Dash gritted his teeth. “You think you’re so great, but all you do is use Saderia to contact your stupid sister! All you ever do is use her to replace Claw!”

Dingo stopped.

Tense, thick silence fell over the desert. Several dingoes all around camp had turned to stare at the two of them with wide, curious eyes, while a few had started to creep closer to them to see what was going on. All the

bright conversation that had echoed through the camp just moments ago had died away into a stunned, curious silence. Everything seemed to stop.

For a long moment, Dingo stood deathly still, his back turned to Dash and his face hidden. His fur bristled, but he remained frozen in place, never once daring to look back to meet Dash's eyes. Slowly, in a tense, icy voice just above a whisper, Dingo spoke up without looking at him. "If you ever talk about my sister or Saderia that way again, I will make sure that this pathetic life of yours that you seem to hate so much never ever gets better. I would never use Saderia for anything, and I would rather die than replace Claw."

"Yeah, right." Dash sneered and curled his lip at him with a cold snicker. "You even said she reminded you of Claw and that that's why you protected her. You don't care about Saderia at all. All you care about is yourself. All you want is another 'little sister' you can play hero for."

Dingo whipped around to glare at him with a thunderous snarl. "You've got no right to talk like that!"

"You've got no right to steal my friend and then act like you're so much better than me!" Dash snapped back, his eyes blazing and his tail lashing across the sand.

Glaring at him with fiery brown eyes, Dingo gritted his teeth and started to snap back at him, then stopped and cracked a cold grin, letting out a wild, crazy laugh. "You know what? I take back what I said before, Dash. Now I see why you don't want to talk to Saderia—every time you open your mouth, the only thing that comes out is a bunch of conceited, paranoid nonsense! And to think that at one point, I actually thought you were a decent animal! Ha! Looks like I finally get to see who you really are—funny how your father made it easier to see your true colors!"

"You should talk!" Dash snarled, gritting his teeth and driving his claws furiously into the sand. "You're the one always *acting* so noble and hiding behind a bunch of fancy words! You try to act like you're so kind and humble and perfect when you're nothing but a cold-blooded *murderer!* You're no better than your brother, and Claw knows it—even if she doesn't have the guts to have Saderia tell you!"

"You leave her out of this!" Dingo howled, baring his fangs in a snarl.

The instant his wild howl rang through the camp, several more dingoes looked up in surprise and turned around to face them. Slowly, every dingo in camp started to creep closer to gather around them, curious as to what was going on. A few tense, bewildered whispers spread through the crowd. On the other side of camp, Saderia looked up beside Loki at the sounds of the commotion and hastily leapt to her paws to race closer to it, wanting to see what was happening. Oblivious to the curious stares and whispers of the animals creeping toward them, Dash and Dingo glared at each other with all the fire they could muster.

“No. Why should I?” Dash snapped with a growl and a lash of his tail. “Murderer!”

Dingo gritted his teeth and let out a furious snarl. “Traitor!”

“Friend-stealer!”

“Double-crosser!”

“Guys!” With a shrill cry, Saderia stumbled out through the growing crowd of spectators gathering around her two friends and skidded to a halt just in front of them. Her amber eyes grew wide with shock and she gaped at them in disbelief, her fur beginning to bristle. “What’s going on?”

Her words were ignored. Barely hearing her at all, Dash bared his fangs and let out a furious snarl. “I’m not a traitor!”

“You’re right,” Dingo snapped back, curling his lip in a twisted sneer and letting out a humorless laugh. “Traitor is too good a title for you! There’s not even a word for you as far as I know! You’re a guy who smiles to his best friend’s face and then turns right around to meet with her worst enemy and *then* has the nerve to pretend like he’s so *shocked* and *sorry* now that it’s over! Who does that? It’s like ripping someone’s throat out and then saying, ‘Oh, sorry, I didn’t mean it—I didn’t know what I was doing!’”

“What—you mean the way you did with Bone?” Dash snorted and gritted his teeth in a scowl, his eyes flashing with hatred. “It’s nothing like that! Dastarius tricked me!”

Dingo narrowed his eyes and shook his head in utter disgust and disbelief. “How exactly did he ‘trick’ you? What did he say—‘I’m sorry for trying to kill you and everyone you love’? Why would you even talk to *anyone* who you knew had even the slightest chance of hurting your so-called best friend?”

“Guys!” Saderia snapped, her voice stunned and her eyes growing wide with horror. “Cut it out! This is ridiculous!”

“Well, aren’t you all high and mighty?” Dash shouted, ignoring Saderia and glaring at Dingo with eyes blazing with fury. “This, coming from the guy who let his sister wander out alone in the desert when you knew it was dangerous! At least in my case, Saderia’s still alive!”

Saderia’s eyes widened in shock and her mouth gaped open in horror. “Dash! That was uncalled for!”

Dingo stiffened and gritted his teeth. With a dark, distant look in his eyes, he glared at Dash and sharply lashed his tail, his voice rising to a raw, furious shout. “She’s only alive because of me! If it had been up to you, she would have fallen from that ledge and died!”

“How is it because of you?” Dash gaped at him in disbelief and lashed his tail. “I’m the one who helped her up!”

“I fought off Rock!” Dingo stared at him in incredulity and furiously shook his head, his light brown eyes blazing with hatred. “What would you have done if I hadn’t been up there? Huh?”

Dash gritted his teeth and mutinously flattened his ears with a grudging growl. “All right, fine. So you helped a little bit. What do you want—a medal for it? Or do you just want to make me look even worse?”

Dingo grinned and let out a cold, humorless laugh. “Oh, don’t worry, Dash. There’s nothing I could possibly say or do to make you look worse than you do now.”

“Dingo!” Saderia snapped, whipping around to face him with wide, horrified eyes and frantically bristling fur. “Enough! This is irrational!”

“Of course, if I wanted to ruin your little goody-two-shoes reputation, all I’d have to do is tell a few stories from your little run with Rock!” Dingo growled, ignoring Saderia’s words entirely and talking over her in a raw, savage snarl. “A few stories from the prison would probably do the trick. If everyone knew what you did there, no one would ever look at you the same. And if that’s not enough, I can only imagine what you did to your so-called mother. Considering what you were ‘forced’ to do to me, I’d hate to see what you ended up doing to her!”

Dash gaped at him in disbelief, his heart skipping and his eyes growing wide with horror. “You...I did what I had to! You have no right to talk about what happened! You don’t know what it was like!”

“Actually, I kind of do,” Dingo replied, curling his lip with a tart scowl. “I was on the receiving end of most of it, so I got a pretty good visual.”

Dash gritted his teeth and furiously lashed his tail, his eyes flaming with rage. “You stupid, manipulative freak! I hate you! I wish *you* had fallen from that ledge!”

Dingo just snorted and glared at him. “Well, in that case, I guess we’re even because after what you’ve done to Saderia, I hate you, too.”

Dash lashed his tail and opened his mouth to snap back at him, but Saderia never gave him the chance. With a desperate shout, she leapt in between them and shoved them apart, her eyes wide with panic and horror. “Stop it!” With wide eyes and wildly bristling fur, she whipped around to look back and forth between Dash and Dingo, her voice high with stress and dismay. “What is *wrong* with you two? How can you fight like this? You’re supposed to be friends!”

Dash opened his mouth to protest, but Saderia cut him off with a deadly glare and a desperate cry. “Enough! Just stop fighting!”

Deadly silence fell over the desert. For a long, tense moment, Dash and Dingo glared at each other without a word, barely even noticing Saderia. Saderia stood firmly in between them, glaring back and forth at both of them with darting amber eyes and willing them not to start again. The only sound in the tense desert was the faint pounding of her heart in her ears.

After what felt like forever, Dingo reluctantly lowered his eyes to the ground and let out a long, weary sigh. The fire died from his eyes and his shoulders drooped with defeat. “Sorry if I upset you, Saderia.” With a soft murmur she could just barely hear, the desert Leader turned around and started to slink toward his den, his tail drooping down to the sand.

The other dingoes gathered around them merely stared, their eyes wide with wonder and bewilderment. Saderia’s eyes clouded with sympathy. Tearing her gaze away from Dash’s dark face, she looked after her canine friend and let out a tired sigh. “Dingo...” With clouded amber eyes, she hastily turned to follow him, her expression dark with concern.

Dash’s eyes widened in disbelief. “Saderia, wait!” With a sharp gasp, he lunged after her and leapt forward to stand right in front of her, making her stop in place. Hardly daring to breathe, he stared up at her with

wide, stunned eyes, the fire in his expression gone and replaced by panic. “Wait! I...I’m sorry, too. I...”

“Just move, Dash.” With a scowl, Saderia narrowed her eyes and shouldered her way past him before he could say another word, a dark shadow on her face.

Dash froze in disbelief, his eyes widening and his tail drooping with dismay. Slowly, he turned around to look after her and felt his heart sink. With dull, miserable eyes, he watched as she bounded to catch up with Dingo, her gaze bright with concern. All around him, the other dingoes awkwardly started to shuffle away to return to what they had been doing, muttering to each other in quiet, wondering voices. Standing deathly still at the back of the crowd of dingoes, Loki stared at him with wide, stunned green eyes, as if unable to believe what she had seen, while Maeta and Lightning looked on with deep frowns.

Dash’s fur prickled with discomfort. Trying not to wince, he shook his mane out over his face and turned to slink away to the outskirts of camp, wishing he could forget what he had just done.

“Dingo!” Saderia frantically chased after her canine friend as he slunk toward his den, her heart still pounding with shock. “Wait! I have to talk to you!”

Dingo let out a sigh, but stopped just in front of his den. With a reluctant gleam in his narrowed brown eyes, he slowly turned around to face her and sat back just as she skidded to a halt in front of him. A weak, sad smile crept across his face. “I know you’re probably here to lecture me, but for what it’s worth, I’m sorry about what happened.”

Saderia nodded distractedly, too caught up in her frenzied thoughts to acknowledge the apology. “What was that about?” she demanded, her heart skipping and her fur bristling with concern. “I’ve never seen you guys fight like that before. Were you fighting about...me?”

Dingo let out a weary sigh and looked away. “To be perfectly honest, Saderia, with everything that got thrown in there as insults or otherwise, I’m not even completely sure what it was about anymore. And in any case, I don’t want to upset you...”

“Two of my closest friends almost came to blows,” Saderia snapped, her tail lashing wildly back and forth. “I’m going to be upset no matter

what.”

Dingo lowered his eyes to the ground and let out a long breath. “I guess you’re right.” When she gave him a long look, he flicked his ears at her with a frown, then just looked away and dully twitched his tail. “Fine. It was about you.”

Saderia let out a shaky sigh and pressed a paw to her forehead, her mind spinning. Slowly, she shook her head, her eyes wide and her heart still thumping with panic and disbelief. “Well...are you okay? What Dash said...it wasn’t right. I don’t know what got into him...”

“You don’t have to apologize for him,” Dingo interrupted, holding up a paw to stop her and giving her a stern look. “I’m fine. A few words aren’t going to kill me.”

Saderia frowned and shot him a wary, nervous look. “Are you sure? Some of those things he said...I just thought they might really hurt you.”

Dingo just shrugged and looked away, hiding the clouded look in his eyes. “I’ll get over it. I’m fine, Saderia. Really.”

Saderia just nodded silently, lost in thought. For a tense heartbeat, she didn’t say a word, then slowly looked up at Dingo, her eyes narrowing with tension and wonder. “What exactly was it about? Why were you fighting about me? And who started it?”

Dingo opened his mouth to respond, then paused when he caught sight of something out of the corner of his eye. With a tense frown, he flicked his eyes to the side and paused when he saw Dash standing just a few feet away from him, watching him with a dark glare. When Dingo looked closely, he could see the fear hiding behind the darkness in Dash’s eyes. With a tense frown, Dingo hesitated for a long moment, then let out a soft breath and slowly turned to look back at Saderia, his shoulders slumping with defeat. “I did.”

Saderia’s eyes widened in surprise. “You did?”

“Yeah. I guess...what you told me about Dash just...really upset me and...” He glanced at Dash out of the corner of his eye and let out a weary sigh. “I guess I just wanted to try to talk some sense into him because I was mad about the way he was treating you. Things just got out of hand, I suppose.”

Saderia narrowed her eyes and studied him with a dark, curious frown. She highly doubted that Dingo had truly been the one to start the

fight, but she decided not to question it. Instead, she just lowered her head with a sigh and listlessly flicked her tail, her heart feeling heavy with dread. “Well...I guess I have to go talk to Loki and Maeta now to see how they’re reacting to all this. We’re probably going to have to leave now that this has happened.”

Dingo’s eyes clouded with regret and he nodded with a sad frown. “I understand. I’m sorry for upsetting you, Saderia. Believe me, that’s the last thing I want to do.”

Saderia just nodded darkly, keeping her eyes locked on the ground. With a sad, listless sigh, she slowly rose to her paws and turned around to leave. Dreading each step, she padded away from him and trudged out into the camp to find Loki and Maeta, her tail dragging across the ground.

With sad brown eyes and a regretful frown, Dingo watched her pad away until she disappeared into the crowd of anxiously whispering dingoes in the center of camp. For a long moment, he stared after her in silence, then looked up when the soft thud of paw steps sounded beside him. Cutting his eyes to the side, he frowned when he saw Dash step up beside him and stop just a few paces away, his expression tense and uneasy.

When Dingo turned to look up at him, Dash scowled and glared at him, but flicked his tail tensely with nervousness. Lowering his head, he dropped his voice to a dark, guarded whisper. “Why did you take the fall for me?”

Dingo raised an eyebrow and let out a soft, humorless chuckle. “Believe me, Dash, I didn’t do it for you. I did it for her.” When Dash blinked in surprise, he simply flicked his tail and shrugged. “Which would upset her more? Being annoyed with me for a while or having another strike against you—another reason to wonder whether she should trust you or not? Unlike some of us here, I tend to think of someone other than myself every once in a while.”

“Saderia!”

Saderia looked up at the sound of her name just in time to see Loki skid to a stop right in front of her in the center of camp. With wide green eyes shimmering with confusion and concern, Loki stared at her in silence, questioning her with her eyes. Behind her, Maeta and Tawny sat beside

Lighting and Bunny by the water trough, casting curious glances at Saderia and studying the tense camp with bewildered eyes.

Narrowing her eyes, Saderia padded to a stop in front of Loki and tensely looked down at her paws, her voice strained and dark. “Uh...Hi, Loki...”

Loki frowned and sharply flicked her tail. “What’s going on?”

Saderia shrugged and helplessly shook her head. “Honestly, I have no idea, Loki.”

The cheetah narrowed her eyes with a scowl. “Were Dash and Dingo *fighting?*”

Saderia just shook her head again with a weary, defeated sigh. “I guess...I don’t know. I don’t know what it was all about or why it happened. It’s just...It’s over now, so let’s just drop it. Everyone’s fine now...I think.”

Loki hesitated and studied her with narrowed green eyes, then looked away with a faint nod, her eyes clouded and dark. “All right. If you say so.” She paused, then looked up with a tense frown. “So what now?”

Saderia let out a long sigh and looked away. Out of the corner of her eye, she glanced back to see Dash standing a few paces away from her on the outskirts of camp, staring at the ground with dark, narrowed eyes. A few feet away from him, Dingo sat back beside his den, talking in hushed voices with Rip, who seemed to have come up to ask questions none of the other dingoes dared to ask. Every now and then, Dash and Dingo shot each other cold, bitter looks out of the corners of their eyes, their expressions still burning with fire. It was probably only a matter of time before another fight broke out.

Biting back another sigh, Saderia looked back up at Loki and just shook her head. “I suppose we should go back to the forest now. I’m sorry this trip hasn’t exactly...turned out the way I planned...”

Loki just shook her head and flicked her lightly with her tail. “It’s all right, Saderia. It was fine.” She paused and cast a glance back over her shoulder at Maeta and Tawny, then looked back and nodded toward the two leopards. “I’ll tell the others we’re leaving and help separate Tawny and Bunny. You go get Dash and say goodbye to Dingo. Then we can leave.”

Saderia nodded with a soft sigh. “All right. Thanks, Loki.” When Loki simply nodded and turned to walk toward Maeta and the others,

Saderia took a deep breath and slowly rose to her paws. Practically dragging her paws across the ground, she turned to pad toward Dingo's den to tell him she was leaving. As she trailed toward the dingo Leader, she glanced at Dash out of the corner of her eye, feeling a pang of sadness and dismay. Why had Dash started that fight with Dingo? Despite what Dingo had said, she knew it had been him who had started it. Dingo wouldn't do that. Dash would. Lately, at least.

A tense frown crossed her face. Why was Dash so argumentative lately? And why had he gotten so angry at Dingo when Dingo hadn't done a thing to him? None of it made sense. With a weary sigh, she shook the thoughts out of her head and looked up at her canine friend just as she stepped up to him. Ignoring her fears that Dash truly had changed, she let out a tired breath and called Dingo's name just as she stopped in front of him. "Dingo!"

At the sound of her voice, Dingo looked up and managed a half-hearted smile when she crept to a stop right in front of him. "Hi, Saderia. I take it you've decided to leave?"

Saderia looked down and nodded, trying not to wince. "I'm sorry, but...I don't think staying here would be a good idea..."

"Fair enough." Dingo let out a soft breath and lightly flicked his tail. Raising his eyebrows at her, he gave her a knowing look and slowly rose to his paws. "But I'm going to lead you back to the forest. Before you try to protest, don't. I'll stay away from Dash, and I won't say a word to him. I just want to make sure you guys will be safe. I don't want to stay back and let you leave on your own and then find out Rock's followers attacked you. You saw how they attacked the camp, and I don't want you getting hurt because of a fight and a misunderstanding."

Saderia managed a weak smile. "All right." She paused, then narrowed her eyes and turned around to face Dash, trying not to flinch when she saw him staring back at her with dark amber eyes. Tensely lashing her tail, she nodded to him and raised her voice to a sharp, curt shout. "Dash, come on! We're leaving!"

Dash looked up at the sound of her voice and narrowed his eyes. With a tense frown, he reluctantly rose to his paws and silently started to slink toward her, trying to hide a guilty frown behind his mane. Part of him was secretly glad they were finally leaving, but another part of him couldn't

help but feel bad about it. After all, he knew he had caused it. And besides that, the pain on Saderia's face was enough to make it all decidedly not worth it...

The procession through the desert seemed to last forever. Silence and tension hung over the party of animals the entire way, growing stronger and stronger with every step they took through the vast land of sand. Dingo led the way through the desert with Saderia close behind him, while Loki, Maeta, and Tawny followed them. Rip and Tear walked on either side of Loki, Maeta, and Tawny to protect them from any attacks from the side, while Dash trudged along silently behind them all, trying not to look at any of them.

No one said a word to each other the entire trip. Even Tawny seemed to sense the tension hanging over them and found it best to keep quiet. Keeping his eyes locked on his paws, Dash tried as hard as he could not to look up at Dingo, afraid he would lose it and rip him to shreds. As if it wasn't bad enough that everyone had seen their fight, now Dingo had to act like the wounded but noble party as he put aside their differences to valiantly lead them through the desert to safety. Dash's blood boiled with rage. He really, *really* hated Dingo.

Oblivious to Dash's bitter thoughts, Saderia kept her eyes locked on the horizon and didn't bother to speak to or look at anyone. Especially Dash. With every second spent trapped in the tension haunting her party of forest animals and Dingo's pack members, her fur prickled more and more with embarrassment. Maeta, Loki, and Tawny had probably been looking forward to a good time, and instead they had gotten...this. Saderia almost winced at the thought. Why did such horrible, uncomfortable things always have to happen when she had company? Her ears drooped and her eyes narrowed with bitterness. As if it wasn't bad enough that they had fought in the first place, had Dash *really* had to fight with Dingo with not only all the dingoes in the pack watching but Maeta and Loki as well?

Biting back a sigh, she looked up at the tall sand dune looming ahead of her and tensely lashed her tail. With a deep frown, she leaned closer to Dingo and dropped her voice to a tense, antsy whisper. "How long until we reach the forest?"

Dingo looked up at the dune ahead of him as they started to climb up the side of it and merely shrugged. “About five minutes.”

Saderia blinked in surprise. “What? Really?”

Dingo simply smiled and nodded to the land ahead of them. With wide eyes, Saderia turned around to look ahead just as she climbed to the top of the tall sand dune and froze. Her heart skipped in surprise and her mouth gaped open in disbelief.

Right before their eyes, the forest appeared out of the dry desert sand as if out of nowhere. Bright against the dullness of the sand, the blooming green land stretched out before them in either direction as far as one could see. Towering trees seemed to unfold right before their eyes, forming an enormous leafy canopy over the entire forest that hid its depths from sight. Just a few paces away from them, the light brown sand disappeared into a wild spattering of grass. From where Saderia stood, she could just see the small patch of grass on the border where she and her friends had left the day before.

With wide eyes, Saderia gazed out at the forest in shock and found herself smiling despite her annoyance. Slowly, she shook her head with a tiny grin and gave Dingo a playful flick of her tail. “You always do that when we cross the desert—you let me think we’re hours and hours away from the forest, but then when I ask, it’s waiting right there, just in front of us.”

Dingo chuckled and grinned. “I guess I *do* do that, huh? My bad.”

Saderia just shook her head with a smile. Letting out a relieved sigh, she hastily bounded down the side of the sand dune with Dingo and the rest of her party close behind her. While Rip and Tear bounded to a stop at the top of the sand dune to watch them leave, Saderia led the way toward the forest with Dingo and the rest of the forest animals following right behind her. In a flash, she shot across the light brown sand and skidded to a halt only when her paws brushed soft green grass.

Smiling to herself, Saderia stepped out on the forest side of the border and turned around to look back out at the desert. Loki instantly bounded past her into the forest and skidded to a halt just behind Saderia, while Maeta quickly followed her, carrying Tawny by the scruff. Silently, the two leopards sat back behind Saderia to wait for her to say goodbye. At the same time, Dash stalked past Saderia without a word and slipped toward

the dense woods rising up just past the border, never once looking at her. With a dark scowl, he stormed into the shadows of the trees just behind her and stopped to wait in the darkness, trying not to look at any of his companions.

Ignoring him, Dingo stepped up to the border and stopped just in front of Saderia, his paws barely brushing the grass. When Saderia looked up at him with a weary sigh, the desert Leader smiled and nodded to her in farewell.

Saderia managed a weak smile, though her eyes shimmered with regret. "Goodbye, Dingo," she murmured, nodding to him and trying to return the warm look. "Thanks for getting us back here safely. I'll...I'll see you later sometime. Next weekend, I guess."

"It's a date." With a warm smile, Dingo flicked her lightly with his tail and let out a quiet sigh. "Until then, take care, Saderia." Giving her a long, lingering look, he just smiled at her, then turned around to walk away. In a flash, he bounded away from the border and darted up the side of the sand dune to join his two brothers. As soon as he reached them, he murmured something she couldn't hear and flicked his tail to signal for them to follow. Side by side, the three brothers turned and darted down the sand dune to race back to their camp. In a few seconds, they disappeared behind the dune and vanished into the endless sea of sand around them.

Saderia smiled after him, but felt the weak grin fade when he disappeared. For a long moment, she stared after him in silence, then slowly turned around when someone tapped her on the shoulder. With a faint frown, she looked back just in time to see Loki step up behind her and pause when she caught her gaze.

The cheetah managed a weak smile and nodded to her. "We should go, too. We'll see you later, Saderia. Have fun and take care."

Saderia weakly returned the smile and flicked her lightly with her tail. "You too, Loki. I'll see you later."

Loki grinned and waved, then turned around to walk back toward Maeta and Tawny. Flicking her tail to signal for Maeta to lead the way, she fell into step beside the leopard leader, keeping a close eye on the sleepy cub dangling from her jaws. Side by side, Maeta and Loki pushed through a thick wall of trees and undergrowth into the dense forest beyond the border

and disappeared into the woods. In seconds, their paw steps faded away into silence. They were gone.

For a long moment of silence, Saderia stared after them, the smile fading from her face. After a tense heartbeat of quiet, she let out a long sigh and wearily tore her eyes off the place where they had disappeared. Keeping her gaze locked on the ground, she turned to stalk toward Dash into the dense woods opposite the direction Maeta and Loki had gone. Her eyes clouded when she stepped past him and she didn't bother to look up at him even when she felt his gaze on her back.

"Come on," she muttered. "Let's go home."

Silence hung over the two animals. Side by side, Saderia and Dash trudged through the dense woods without a word, stumbling around thick clumps of undergrowth and winding past tall, ancient trees. Neither of them said a thing to each other with each step they took on the long trip back home. Both kept their eyes locked on the ground, never once daring to even look at each other. Tension crackled between them. For the longest moment, neither of them spoke. While Saderia led the way through the dense forest, Dash just trailed along beside her, winding through the woods and keeping his eyes on his paws. The air felt thick around them.

After a long, tense moment of silence, Dash let out a long sigh and slowly looked up, his expression dark with pain and regret. Narrowing his eyes, he glanced up at Saderia as he wound his way through the woods and frowned, unable to take the silence anymore. "Saderia, I'm sorry..."

"I don't want to talk about it," Saderia interrupted. She never once looked at him, keeping her eyes focused entirely on the path through the woods ahead of them. "I don't want to talk to you."

Dash let out a long sigh and wearily looked away. "Look, I know I messed up, but..."

"That is an understatement," Saderia cut in, raising her eyebrows and shooting him a dry glare out of the corner of her eye. Flattening her ears, she looked away and hesitated, wondering whether to take this any further or just keep walking. Even though she wanted to just stay silent, she couldn't keep it bottled up inside of her any longer. Gritting her teeth, she whirled around to face Dash and lashed her tail in fury. "Just what did you expect to accomplish by fighting with Dingo?"

Dash blinked in surprise and struggled to find the words to respond.
“I...”

“Why would you even *think* to say the things you did?” Saderia narrowed her eyes and glared at him before he could speak, her amber irises flashing with anger and disgust. “Why would those things even pop into your head? For goodness’ sake, Dash, how could you be so cruel? What you said was disgusting and low—lower than I thought you could ever go! What were you thinking that made you mention Claw, of all animals, in a fight about me? No, don’t answer that, Dash. I already know. You were just trying to hurt him. That whole fight was nothing but a ruse to hurt him because you know as well as I do that you’ve got no real way to argue with him. The only thing you could do was spew a bunch of insults and accusations that had nothing to do with what the fight was actually about in the hopes that it would hurt him and that that would somehow make you right!”

Dash’s eyes widened in alarm. Instantly, he opened his mouth to protest, but couldn’t find the right words. “I...I’m sorry...” he stammered.

“Yeah, well, even if you did actually mean that, it’s a little late for apologies.” Saderia shot him a cold glare out of the corner of her eye and sharply lashed her tail. “Dingo’s already gone, and he’s the one you should be apologizing to, not me.” With a cold scowl, she turned away from him and shook her head in disgust, her eyes blazing with anger and disappointment. “I just don’t understand how you could be so cruel!”

“Saderia...”

“He almost *died* for you!” With a sharp hiss, Saderia whipped around to face him with blazing amber eyes, making him freeze in front of her. Gritting her teeth, she glared at him and furiously lashed her tail across the grass. “He saved our lives hundreds of times and came to our rescue when we needed it most, and now you have the nerve to turn your back on him and do everything in your power just to hurt him when the only thing he’s ever done is try to look out for us!”

Dash’s eyes widened in shock and his mouth gaped open in a silent protest. Blinking several times, he struggled desperately to find the words to object, then slowly narrowed his eyes. After a tense moment of silence, he slowly pushed his fears away and flattened his ears with a tense, dark

scowl. His voice dropped to a low growl. “No, you’re wrong, Saderia. He didn’t do all of that for me. He almost died for *you*.”

Saderia just stared back at him with a dark frown, her narrowed eyes flashing with fire. “Well, I’m sorry you feel that way,” she whispered with a terse, icy hiss. “Now, if you don’t mind, I’d like to get back home.”

Chapter Ten

Investigations

Dash tossed and turned in his sleep, thrashing beneath his rumpled blanket and leaving claw marks across the mattress. An endless stream of memories flashed through his mind, each as hazy and indistinct as the next. Memories of Dastarius's sneering face, Rock's eerie smirk, and Saderia dangling from the evil tyrant's den flew through his mind over and over again, sending shivers down his spine. With each new scene that flashed before his eyes, he seemed to hop into a new world. One minute, he stood on the sand, looking up at Rock's monstrous den as the tyrant addressed his pack. The next minute, he stood in the prison over Dingo's bloody, broken body. The next, he stood at the top of the rugged ledge of Rock's den, staring down into Saderia's fearful eyes as she struggled to pull herself up.

Fear shot through him like a bolt of electricity. With a gasp, Dash forced his eyes open and froze. His breath caught in his throat. Every part of him went numb with shock and his heart skipped a beat as his surroundings slowly crept into focus.

Slowly, the darkness surrounding him on all sides started to fade away. A shadowy dream clearing gradually crept into view all around him. Brittle, colorless grass as cold as icicles rose up from the ground beneath him, sending shivers through his paws. Dead trees took shape around the outskirts of the clearing, forming dense woods all around the dark glade. Black shadows danced in the thick woods, hiding what lay beyond the clearing in darkness. An odd silver glow seemed to light up the clearing from within, leaving the outskirts draped in shadows. Everywhere Dash turned, all he could see was the eerie clearing around him and the dark woods beyond it.

His heart skipped and his mind spun with horror, but only one word flickered through his mind. *No.* No, he could not be back in this place again. No, this could not be happening again. No, this could not be real...

A shiver raced down his spine. The clearing around him was one he knew all too well—one he had hoped he would never have to see again. The dark, wintry glade was a perfect, dream-like replica of the frosty clearing he had lived in before he had moved in with Saderia. Only the odd, ethereal glow lighting up the clearing made it look different from its living world version. No matter which world it inhabited, though, the clearing held terrible memories that made him wish he could have left it behind forever. The harsh, unpleasant memories he had of the real life clearing were only half as bad as the recollection he kept of the dream clearing. Neither were places he ever wanted to be.

Shuddering at the realization of where he was, Dash instinctively unsheathed his claws and tried to hide a tremble of dread. With a shaky breath, he slowly turned to gaze out at the clearing around him with narrowed eyes, feeling his fur prickle with every new place he looked. As if sensing a terrible danger lurking in the shadows, he whipped around to stare out at the dark woods before him and almost jumped.

Two dark amber eyes leered out at him from the pitch black shadows haunting the woods just beyond the clearing, shining with an otherworldly light and hiding any glimmer of emotion. Dash's heart stopped. Feeling his throat go dry, he stared into the two dark eyes in horror, hardly daring to breathe. The eyes never once blinked. For a long, tense moment, they simply stared into him, never shifting or losing their focus. They seemed to stare straight into his soul.

Dash stared back in horror, hardly daring to breathe. After what felt like an eternity of silence, he let out a shaky breath and whispered in a voice that seemed to break on every word. "D-Dad? Is...is that you?" Even as he spoke, he hoped with all of his heart that it wasn't. He would rather face whatever horrific monsters might live in the eerie dream world than ever see his father again.

The eyes blinked once at the sound of his voice. For a long moment, nothing spoke or moved. The clearing remained silent. Then slowly, without ever looking away from Dash's wide amber eyes, a shadowy figure stepped out from the blackness of the woods. As if taking shape from the shadows themselves, two strong dark brown paws stepped out into the clearing right in front of him. Right before his eyes, a dark brown lion slunk out of the dark forest, his pitch black mane seeming to take form from the

darkness itself. Without a word, the dark lion slowly stepped out into the clearing and stopped just in front of Dash, his eyes never leaving his. A dark shadow haunted his face, but his expression remained emotionless.

“Hello again, my son,” the lion whispered in a soft, strained voice.

Fear spiked through Dash in a quick flash of ice. Unconsciously, he stumbled backward, his fur bristling and his eyes widening in alarm. Fighting to keep his wild heartbeat steady, he opened his mouth and struggled to speak the words he had wanted so badly to say—how he would never listen to Dastarius again, how Dastarius should go away for now and forever—but the words wouldn’t come out. In silence, he stared up at Dastarius in horror, unable to speak. As he stared up at his father, though, a twinge of shock flickered across his fear.

Dastarius looked...ragged. Dash hadn’t thought ghosts could ever look so tattered. It wasn’t his appearance that looked scruffy or flustered, but something about him seemed...off. His shoulders seemed to slump and he let his mane hang limply over them instead of holding it high and proud. The usual glimmer of knowing and haughtiness in Dastarius’s bright amber eyes had died away, leaving them looking dull and tense. He seemed...restless somehow. Part of Dash wondered why he looked so strained, but he forcefully reminded himself that he didn’t want to know and that he didn’t care. He didn’t want to know about or be involved in any part of Dastarius’s...existence.

Still... As much as he tried to tell himself he didn’t want to know, he couldn’t help but feel a tingle of curiosity beneath his fear. For a long moment, he simply stared up at Dastarius in silence, then narrowed his eyes with a tense frown, unable to stand the thought of not knowing any longer. “What are you doing here?” he hissed, almost wincing at the quiver in his own voice.

Dastarius only flicked his tail in response and stared back at him without a word, his creepy amber eyes seeming to pierce right into his heart. For several long moments, he studied Dash in silence, as if searching for the right words. After what felt like ages, he simply flicked his ears and rose to his paws. With a lightly twitching tail, he started to pace absently back and forth, his eyes distant and lost in thought. “I’ve come to see how you’re doing,” he murmured in a voice just barely above a whisper. “I’ve

been watching you in my spare time, and I've noticed you've been having a bit of...difficulty with your friends."

Dash blinked in surprise, then narrowed his eyes and gritted his teeth, feeling a hot flash of anger over his fear. Without stopping to think of the danger, he bristled and glared at Dastarius, letting out a sharp hiss. "Well, isn't that nice of you to drop in on me to see how I'm doing after you *destroyed my life!*"

Dastarius's tail gave an extra forceful flick and he cut his eyes at Dash with a dark scowl. Instantly, Dash froze with a jolt of fear and tensed for Dastarius's reaction, but his father merely turned away to continue pacing. Appearing deep in thought, he simply flicked his tail and shrugged, his eyes flashing in the dark. "I didn't destroy your life." Before Dash could protest, he glanced at him out of the corner of his eye and arched an eyebrow. "If anyone did, it was Rock. And besides, wasn't it you who told the Princess that without me, you would all be doomed? That, despite my intentions, my plan did help?"

Dash glared at him with as much fire as he could muster. "If you don't stop quoting my life, I'm going to rip your face off!"

"Such violence!" Dastarius rolled his eyes with an exaggerated sweep of his tail, then turned to glance back at Dash with a faint, condescending sneer. "I think it might be amusing to watch you try to rip the face off of a ghost."

Dash flattened his ears and glared daggers at him. "I hate you so much."

"Perhaps, but it seems I'm not the only one you hate these days." With a knowing gleam in his eyes, Dastarius calmly flicked his tail and raised an eyebrow. "I'm curious to see your response to just one word: Dingo."

Without even realizing it, Dash immediately bristled and dug his claws into the dirt at the mention of Dingo's name, as if he wanted to murder even the thought of him. Almost in the same instant he tensed, though, he regretted it.

With a soft, knowing chuckle, Dastarius sneered and shook his head. "That's about the response I expected."

Dash winced, then glared at him, trying to hide his discomfort with a cold scowl. Gritting his teeth, he watched his father pace with narrowed

eyes and sharply lashed his tail. “All right, fine, so I hate him, too. But I hate you more!”

“Really?” Dastarius glanced at Dash out of the corner of his eye and raised an eyebrow with a cool, knowing sneer. “It seems you and your friends don’t get along anymore.”

“Yeah, because of you!” Dash lashed his tail and gritted his teeth in fury. “If you had never fallen into my life, I wouldn’t have this problem!”

Dastarius cut his eyes at him with a scowl. “If I had never ‘fallen into your life,’ your new *mother* would be dead. So would most of the canines from that filthy desert—although that would most likely, tragically, exclude your hated canine friend. The Princess herself would have run a high risk of dying. As would you.” His eyes flashed in the shadows. “If it weren’t for me, Dash, Rock would still be controlling the forest, and you and your friends would be mere servants, alive only to fulfill his every wish.”

Dash’s fur bristled with rage. “That’s a lie!”

“That’s not what you told Princess.” Dastarius cracked a grin and raised an eyebrow. “Why try so hard to convince her that I helped when you yourself don’t believe it? Or are you simply arguing for the sake of arguing?”

Dash narrowed his eyes and gritted his teeth, his heart racing with anger. “All right, enough with the fancy words and your attempts to psychoanalyze me.” Flattening his ears, he glared down at the ground and let out a weary sigh. “Just tell me what you want, and then leave. Forever.”

Dastarius raised an eyebrow and let a faint grin flit across his face for one brief moment. A second later, it disappeared and he composed his expression into seriousness once again. With a bright gleam in his flashing amber eyes, Dastarius simply turned back to continue pacing and gazed out at the woods, seeming to gather his thoughts. For a long moment, he remained silent, lost in thought. After what felt like forever, he paused in his pacing and glanced at Dash out of the corner of his eye, his expression cool but guarded. “My reasons for being here are a bit complicated.”

“Then leave,” Dash growled with a flat scowl, his eyes narrowing. “The last time you came here for reasons that were ‘complicated,’ my entire life ended up being destroyed.”

“I’m sticking to the stance that my presence did *not* destroy your life, but that’s an argument for another day.” With a cool frown, Dastarius gazed out at the woods, then slowly turned back to face Dash. His narrowed amber eyes bored into Dash’s and a darker, more serious frown crossed his face. “I’m going to be honest with you, son...”

“That in itself is a lie,” Dash growled with a tart flick of his tail.

Dastarius let out an aggravated sigh and rolled his eyes. “Fine. I’ll be honest with you in the sense that I’ll be as frank and up-front about things as my predicted hidden agenda allows me. Is that better?”

Dash narrowed his eyes with a frown, but merely flicked his tail and eyed him curiously. “Go on.”

With a soft sigh, Dastarius stopped pacing and turned to sit back in front of him, wrapping his tail calmly around his paws. For a heartbeat of silence, he watched Dash with narrowed eyes and hesitated, then merely lifted his head and spoke up in a clear, calm voice. “I’m going to be honest about this at the very least, Dash—I don’t actually have a plan. While I do, as you’ve probably already guessed, have a sort of hidden motive, I have no Princess-murdering, world-dominating plots on hand at the moment. And considering how horribly things turned out last time, I have no intention of using you in any way to hurt the Princess. You’ve already proven that your loyalty to her dictatorship is far too strong.”

Dash gritted his teeth and started to snap back at him that she wasn’t a dictator, then just stopped. Trying to protest was pointless. No matter what he said, Dastarius was just going to keep being Dastarius. Nothing he did would stop him from insulting Saderia. Biting back a sigh, Dash narrowed his eyes instead and just glared at his father, his tail twitching tensely across the ground. “I’m not sure I believe that, but go on.”

“Oh, I had already guessed that you wouldn’t believe me,” Dastarius replied with a careless flick of his tail. “But that doesn’t really bother me that much.” His eyes narrowed and bored into Dash’s, gleaming with a dark sense of seriousness and tension. “All I want from you is one small favor. I’m not going to visit you in dreams, I’m not going to try to get into your head and trick you, I’m not going to ask you to go on any life-changing trips, and I’m not going to make you sneak behind the Princess’s back...for a long period of time. All I’m asking is for you to do just one...small...thing.”

Dash blinked in surprise, then narrowed his eyes in a glare and let out a furious snarl. “Forget it! The last time I did ‘one small thing’ for you, I ended up on top of some rock out in the desert staring down at my best friend with you telling me to kill her! And that’s *not* going to happen again!”

“Fair enough,” Dastarius growled with a forced shrug and a hard look in his eyes. “But imagine this for a minute—you’re dead. Let’s just pretend for a moment that you’ve died. No, I’m not going to kill you,” he added with a roll of his eyes, seeing the nervousness that flashed across Dash’s face. “As I’ve told you a million times, the dead cannot harm or kill the living...unfortunately. But as I was saying, let’s pretend for a moment that you died right here and now.

“Now that you’re dead, you can’t speak to anyone in the living world...in theory, at least. You also can’t *touch* anything in the living world. For the most part, you can’t do *anything* except sit around and think about *life*. Now, you’re sitting up here thinking about life, and eventually you realize that there is at least one thing that you’ve always wanted to do...or see...or *read*...And now that you’re thinking about it, you realize you would do *anything* for just one chance to do it. Unfortunately, since you can’t touch anything in the living world, you’re stuck. *However*, you just so happen to be able to speak to an animal from the living world through some...strange and yet unexplained bending of the rules...and they have the capability of helping you to...‘live out’ your last wish, so to speak. Wouldn’t you want them to do that for you?”

Dash narrowed his eyes with a deep scowl. “Forget it, Dastarius. I’ve run out of sympathy for you. If you wanted someone to take pity on you and help you in the afterlife, then maybe you should have been just a bit nicer and less *evil* in, er...normal life.”

Dastarius lightly flicked his tail and shrugged, keeping his tone calm and even. “I see your point, son, but what you’re so caught up on is the fact that it’s me. What if this was some other animal who wanted you to do something for them? Like, say...Queen Karenisha?” When Dash raised his eyebrows, Dastarius frowned and rolled his eyes. “Oh, come on. You can’t tell me she hasn’t done bad things in her life, Dash. She did kill me—something I remember quite clearly, even if you don’t. She also put you in that fortress when you were sick in the strange forest, and in an act of pure

selfishness, she ran away from that forest, causing a multitude of problems—not least of which, the war. She's done bad things in her life just like I have, but if she needed your help, would you help her?"

Dash glared at him and sharply lashed his tail. "Stop trying to mess with my mind and twist morality to get me to help you. This isn't about her, Dad. This is about you. You can try all you want to manipulate me with your stupid words and your stupid head games, but I know better now. I know that *you* only want to hurt me and Saderia, that *you* are the selfish one, and that *you* don't regret a single bad thing you've done. That's the difference between you and actually decent animals who have made mistakes. Yeah, some of us may do bad things sometimes—maybe even things as bad as the things you did—but unlike you, we regret them. I know that *you* are a truly bad animal, and I also know that *you* are running out of options." He lifted his head with a defiant scowl and flattened his ears. "No matter what you say—no matter what kind of guilt trip you try to lay on me—I will not listen to you. No matter who's right or who's done what, you're still out to hurt me, and in my book, that makes you evil. And that means that I don't want anything to do with you, and nothing you say can change that."

Dastarius's eyes flashed with fury and he leapt toward Dash with a thunderous roar. As though whisked away by a passing breeze, his mask of calmness disappeared in a sudden blaze of rage. Baring his fangs in a snarl, he skidded to a halt just in front of Dash and towered over him with blazing amber eyes, practically shaking with hatred. "How dare you, you ungrateful brat? If it weren't for me, you would all be dead now!" His furious voice boomed through the clearing like a thunderclap. "I swear, if I weren't a ghost, you would be dead right now! If for nothing else, I would want to come back to life *just to kill you!*"

Dash shivered and shakily took a step back, desperately trying to remind himself that the dead couldn't hurt the living. Even though he knew it was true, his heart still skipped with terror and his blood ran cold at the sight of Dastarius's blazing amber eyes. All he wanted to do was get far, far away from him, but he didn't know where he could possibly go in this unfamiliar world of dreams. Suppressing a shiver, he made himself look up at his father and choke out the words he needed to say in a shaky voice just above a whisper. "You can't hurt me, so just leave. Now."

Dastarius narrowed his eyes and studied him with a dark scowl. Slowly, he drew back, shaking his pitch black mane out over his face as if to wipe away his fury and regain his self-control. Lowering his voice to a softer growl, he tensely sat back and wrapped his tail around his paws with a strained sense of composure. “Perhaps I can’t, son. Not physically anyway. But think about this: You can’t stop me from entering your dreams, no matter how hard you try. So unless you do me this one little *favor*, I will haunt your nightmares for the rest of your miserable life.”

Dastarius’s eyes flashed in the darkness. “I’ll let you think about that for a second, Dash. What would it be like to see me in your sleep for the rest of your life? You would never get a good night’s sleep again. That, I would make sure of. Eventually, Princess would catch on that you were seeing me in your sleep again, and she would just suspect you of being a traitor even more since she would have no way of knowing you were seeing me against your will. If you tried to tell her that, she’d just think you were lying. If she finds out you’ve visited me enough times, eventually her suspicion of you will grow to the point where she no longer feels safe around you. Next thing, her parents will know, and so will the whole forest. The kingdom won’t want you as their Prince, and Princess won’t want you as her brother. After that, the living world version of this clearing will be your only home *again*. Now let’s weigh this on a figurative scale, son. Is *all of that* worth suffering through for just this one little thing I’m asking for?”

Dash stared at him with wide eyes full of horror. His heart skipped a beat and all the color seemed to drain out of his face as he imagined the horror Dastarius had described. Every part of him felt tense with dismay. He would like to believe that it was nothing but a bunch of lies...but the scary thing was that it wasn’t. All of that very well *could* happen. If Saderia found out Dastarius was speaking to him in dreams again—whether it was against his will or not—she truly might start to hate him. His eyes grew wide with horror and his breath caught in his throat. What if his life truly did become the nightmare Dastarius had described? What if he truly did lose Saderia’s friendship...forever?

Feeling a shiver race down his spine, he stared up at his father with wide eyes, hardly daring to breathe. “You wouldn’t...” he whispered.

Dastarius snorted and raised an eyebrow. “I started the entire forest on fire, kidnapped the King and Queen, worked for ten years to kill the

Princess and take over the forest, then later took over your dreams to try to force you to kill her for me. Try me.”

Dash gaped at him in disbelief. “Why won’t you just leave me alone?”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that.” Dastarius’s eyes flashed and a cold shadow flitted across his face. “You see, son, you happen to be my only link to the living world, and in case you haven’t already figured this out, there’s something there that I *really* want.” He paused, then narrowed his eyes, a tense scowl creeping across his face. With flashing eyes, he met Dash’s stunned gaze and coolly flicked his tail. “Listen, son, I’ll make you a deal. You do this *one* little thing for me, and I’ll leave you alone. Forever.”

Dash’s eyes widened in surprise and his heart skipped. Feeling his mind whirl with fear and confusion, he stared at Dastarius for a long moment without saying a word, not knowing what to say. Before he even had a chance to think of what to do, he found himself stammering, “What... What exactly is it you want?” He almost winced. Without even realizing it, he found himself hoping that this bargain might work out in his favor. Maybe Dastarius only wanted something small, something that couldn’t cause trouble. Maybe he could do this one small thing just to get him to leave him alone...

Dastarius paused and studied him thoughtfully, then slowly leaned back with a tense, knowing gleam in his eyes. For a long moment, he remained silent, watching Dash with thoughtful amber eyes. After several moments of staring into Dash’s soul, he finally lifted his head and spoke up in a soft, tense murmur. “There are these books...ancient books...that I really need to read. I can’t say I know exactly what’s in them or even why I want to read them so badly. All I can say is that they’ve piqued my curiosity, and I *must* have them. The only thing I want you to do is find these books and open them for me. You see, as a ghost, I am unable to turn pages, which—humiliation aside—can be quite problematic, given the situation. The only thing I need you to do is find the books, open them, turn their pages in time for me to read them, and keep quiet about it. After that, you’ll never see me in your dreams again.” He paused and studied Dash for a long moment, then narrowed his eyes. “Do we have a deal?”

Dash blinked at him in surprise, then hesitated, his heart skipping a beat and his paws tensing with panic. Confusion and indecision clouded his

mind. Slowly, he looked down at his paws, his mind whirling as he struggled to figure out what to do. Books...Why did Dastarius suddenly seem so interested in books? What kind of ancient books did he mean? And why exactly had they captured his attention?

A deep frown crossed his face. On one hand...opening a few old books for his father didn't seem all that bad. But on the other hand...anything related to Dastarius in any way generally *was* bad. Dash didn't know why his father wanted those books, but he didn't think it was for anything good. Somehow he doubted his father just wanted to read a good story. Still...it didn't really seem all that dangerous and horrible to do this 'favor' for him. In light of the horrible future Dastarius had promised him in return for turning down the favor, it seemed almost reasonable.

Dash took a deep breath and nervously let it out, desperately trying to come to some sort of conclusion. He should do it...He shouldn't do it...The consequences would be too great if he didn't...The consequences could be just as bad if he did...Shivering from the thought of the nightmare Dastarius had described, Dash instinctively found himself leaning toward doing the favor. After all, it was just one thing...

Biting his lip, he looked up at Dastarius out of the corner of his eye with a tense frown and almost jumped. When he looked closely at Dastarius's calm, serious face, he could just see the beginnings of a sneer twitching at the corners of his mouth, as if he were just waiting for Dash to say yes. An instinctual jolt of panic and defensiveness suddenly shot through Dash like a lightning bolt, snapping him out of his haze. Understanding dawned in his mind. He couldn't do what Dastarius wanted, no matter how harmless it seemed. That was how he had gotten fooled last time, and he couldn't afford to be tricked again. Saderia would be much more upset if she found out that Dash had actually done something for Dastarius than if she just found out that he had been visiting him. And if Dastarius really did intend to visit him every night just to ruin his life...then he could only hope that he would find some way to get Saderia to trust him. He would do whatever it took to get her to see that he wouldn't betray her again. Somehow, he wouldn't let Dastarius win.

Narrowing his eyes, Dash made himself look up at Dastarius with a glare, his tone firm and tense. "No. No deal, Dad. I'm not going to do what you want this time."

The sneer slipped right off his father's face. A flicker of shock flashed across Dastarius's eyes, but Dash didn't stick around to see his reaction. Fighting back his fears, Dash rose to his paws and turned his back on Dastarius, hiding the tension on his face. Trying to suppress a shiver, he made himself turn to stalk toward the dark forest surrounding the clearing, leaving Dastarius behind. "I'm leaving," he called over his shoulder.

Dastarius's glare scorched his back. Out of the corner of his eye, Dash saw his father curl his lip and scowl at him. "Very well, son. But I hope you're prepared to deal with the consequences."

Dash paused and turned to glance back over his shoulder to look him in the eye, his amber irises glowing with determination. "I am."

Dastarius simply sneered a humorless sneer and twitched his tail across the grass. "Good. I suppose things will be easier for you now that you've made it known whose side you're on. Although I'm not sure why you've chosen to stay on 'the good side.' It seems to me that you now hate most of your so-called teammates."

Dash narrowed his eyes with a frown. "I only hate Dingo. And that's just because he deserves it."

"I see." Dastarius shrugged and snickered humorlessly to himself. "I see what you want to do, Dash. You want to make it so that Princess can't talk to Dingo anymore—so that he can't steal your friend. But even if you manage that, how long until Princess moves on to another friend on 'the good side'? Like, say...Jeb? Will you hate him then, too? And then if you manage to get rid of him, will you hate that cheetah—Loki—or that leopard—Lisa—if Princess starts to hang out with them?" He took a step toward his son and raised an eyebrow. "Let's face it, Dash. You've turned your back on the scum that hangs out on the so-called 'good side,' as they have done to you. What I can't understand is why you would choose to remain on the side of animals you hate when you could join the side of animals you only...mildly dislike."

Dash flattened his ears. "First of all, I don't 'mildly dislike' you. I hate your guts!"

Dastarius simply shrugged. "You might say that now, but it seems to me that your fight with the dog held a lot more venom than your brief fight here with me."

“Regardless,” Dash growled, “I still like some animals on ‘the good side,’ even if I don’t like them all. I like Saderia, and I’m staying on the good side because of her.”

“A noble thought,” Dastarius replied with a calm flick of his tail and a cool glint in his eyes. “There’s only one problem. Due to recent events... Saderia doesn’t seem to like you.” He raised an eyebrow. “Why would you want to stay on a side where you both hate and are hated by animals you call your friends? It seems to me, from my humble viewpoint, that the ‘good side’ is good in name only, what with all the hatred going on in its core.”

Dash flattened his ears and shot his father a cold glare. “I don’t care what you say, Dad. I’m still choosing that side. I might *hate* Dingo and maybe some others if they betray me, too, but I’m still on their side.”

“Ah.” Dastarius emphatically nodded his head and raised his eyebrows as if in understanding. “I see. But if you have that attitude, you’re not truly part of ‘the good side,’ are you? It seems to me that that sort of outlook shouldn’t belong in a group labeled *heroes*. So even if you are on their side...you’re still a traitor. But as long as you stay away from this side —my side—you’re also a traitor to me. Even if you did join, you’d still be a traitor, really. Your loyalty would still lie with the Princess. So either way... you’re nothing but a double-crosser, son. In the end, your loyalties lie only with those who benefit you the most at the moment. Last month, that was my side. This month, it’s Princess’s side.”

Dash eyed his father with dark, narrowed eyes, a guarded look on his face. “You know, Dastarius, you can think whatever you want. I don’t even care anymore.”

“I’d guessed as much,” Dastarius replied, raising an eyebrow with a knowing sneer. “Someone who jumps sides as frequently as you probably doesn’t care much for anything. I’ll leave you to reap the benefits of your current side, Dash.”

Dash narrowed his eyes at him, then just shook his head and looked away with a dark scowl. “You do that. You think whatever you want while I live with my *friends*. Just stay out of my dreams, and stay out of my life.”

“Wake up!”

Dash jolted awake in bed at the sound of the sharp voice, his eyes flying open and his heart skipping a beat. Taking in a deep gulp of air, he shook himself forcefully, trying to calm the wild pounding of his heart. With wide eyes, he gazed down at his bed, feeling a pang of relief when he recognized his warm blue blanket and the familiar, sunlit room around him. It seemed he had made it out of Dastarius's clearing back to reality...

Blinking several times, he shook himself out of his daze and turned to look up at the door, then froze. His heart skipped when he saw Saderia standing tensely in the doorway, eyeing him with dark amber eyes. When his gaze met hers, she frowned and took a step back into the shadows of the hallway.

Dash's eyes widened in surprise at the sight of her. "Saderia?" His heart leapt up with hope even as she narrowed her eyes. Was she there because she wanted to give him another chance? Did she want to be friends again?

His hopes plummeted when Saderia narrowed her eyes and gave him a dark, emotionless frown, her voice as guarded as her expression. "Get up, Dash. It's time for school." Without another word, she turned her back on him and started to slink back into the dark hallway.

Dash's heart lurched with dismay and he instantly stumbled out of bed, his eyes wide with sorrow. "Saderia...wait!"

Saderia ignored him. With nothing more than a flick of her tail to dismiss him, she slipped out through the door and slammed it shut behind her with a loud bang. Silence fell over the room.

A long sigh escaped Dash's throat. Hanging his head, he reluctantly started to pad toward the shut door to go eat breakfast and get ready for school. With each step, memories of his eerie dream and thoughts of Saderia flitted through his mind, making him wince and feel even worse. Letting out a weary sigh, he tried to hope that somehow he would be able to make some sort of connection with Saderia during the day, but some dark instinct told him he wouldn't.

The day passed by in a blur. When Dash walked down the dirt path to school alongside Saderia, her face was haunted by an expression of utter desolation and bitterness that tugged at his heart. The instant they walked through the doors of the school building, she put on a smile that could convince any onlookers that she had nothing to hide. At lunch, she laughed

and grinned when she spoke to Loki and Lisa in such a way that no one would ever be able to tell that anything was wrong. Once they left school behind, the smile melted right off her face and vanished in a hollow gaze of sadness and exhaustion. Throughout the rest of the day, she wore the same desolate expression and only squeezed up a smile when she spoke to her parents. A twinge of fear had even flickered into her eyes a few times before she had wiped it away and hidden in her room.

Never once did she say a single word to him. It was as if all he was to her was another ghost haunting her. Watching her. Separated from her by the thin line between the ghost world and the living world. Or in his case, the good side and the bad side.

Saderia thrashed violently on her rumpled blue bed under the bright glow of moonlight, trapped in an endless series of nightmares. A million memories flew through her mind in wild, hazy blurs, sending shivers of terror racing through her body like ice flowing through her veins. A memory of her dangling from the ledge of Rock's monstrous den flashed through her mind, making her wince and let out a shaky cry. A second later, Dash's face flashed before her eyes, making her tense. Images of the vicious fighting in the blood-streaked desert beneath the shadow of the tyrant's huge den flickered before her eyes along with a vision of a wide, bloody ocean threatening to drown everything it touched. Dastarius's face flashed before her eyes. Fear shot through her like a burst of icy water, making her heart stop. In a flash, her eyes flew open just as a scream tore out of her mouth. The instant she opened her eyes, though, her heart skipped a beat.

A new scene opened up before her eyes. Slowly, the darkness surrounding her started to fade away, making her heart beat faster with shock. Miles and miles of light brown sand dunes spread out around her everywhere she turned. An eerie, ethereal glow illuminated the sleepy dunes with an otherworldly light, casting an odd blue shine over the entire scene. The peaceful blue sky hanging over the desert dunes seemed to glow with the same eerie light, torn somewhere between day and night.

Saderia's eyes widened in surprise as she gazed out at the peaceful desert landscape around her. Blinking several times, she started to turn

around to gaze out at the rest of the vast desert, then froze when a soft, feathery voice called her name.

“Saderia!”

Her heart skipped. Letting out a quiet gasp, Saderia whipped around to face the source of the voice, then froze. Just a few paces away from her, a light brown dingo sat on the sand, her light brown eyes shining in the ghostly glow and her mouth curled up in a smile. An otherworldly light shimmered from her translucent brown fur and sparkled around the old pink bandana tied around her neck. A familiar glow of warmth and friendliness shimmered in the spirit’s kind brown eyes.

Saderia blinked several times, then slowly relaxed, feeling an overwhelming wave of relief. “Claw...” she whispered.

Dingo’s ghostly sister smiled and took a step toward her, leaving a trail of light through the sleepy blue air behind her. “Hi, Saderia.” With a bright gleam in her eyes, she sat down right in front of Saderia and held up a paw in a wave. “I’ve been watching you.”

With a faint smile, Saderia simply pricked her ears and tipped her head to the side. “Really?” She paused, feeling an instinctual jolt of alarm. By that point, she was used to the light spirit watching her, but her sudden visit made her feel tense with worry. “Nothing’s wrong, right? I mean, nothing bad is happening, is it?”

Claw blinked in surprise, then hastily shook her head. “No, not that I know of.”

Letting out a soft sigh, Saderia relaxed and managed a faint smile of relief. “Good. I was just worried because...well...usually, you only show up when there’s trouble.”

Claw giggled to herself and rolled her eyes with a smile. “I’m sorry. I guess I’m just not used to having ‘living’ friends, so I didn’t think to visit you when there wasn’t danger.” She paused, then narrowed her eyes with a more serious frown. “But I have still been watching you this past month. I can tell things have been kind of rough for you. I was debating whether or not I should step in—I knew you were strong enough to handle it on your own—but eventually, I decided you needed a friend to help you out. You’ve already got Dash, Dingo, and Jeb, but...well, there’s something about each of them that makes them difficult to talk to. I decided to come visit you

when I heard my brother say that he wished he could be in the forest to help you. It made me realize that you did need a hand every once in a while.”

Saderia managed a grateful smile. “Thank you. It’s just...these dreams...”

“They’re awful,” Claw finished for her, her light brown eyes clouding with pain and sympathy. “I’ve watched you while you’ve been sleeping and seen how you’ve reacted. Your nightmares seem worse than normal. And I overheard what you said to Dingo about those vision things...” She paused, then winced and gave her a sheepish shrug. “Er...I hope you don’t mind me listening in. I keep forgetting living animals probably aren’t used to being, well, spied on...”

Saderia just shrugged and waved her worries away with a flick of her tail. “It’s fine, Claw. I understand.” She wasn’t lying. After knowing the spirit for so long, she had gotten used to the idea of being ‘spied on’ by ghosts. Even if it did bother her, though, she would never hold it against Claw for watching her and others. She couldn’t even imagine how lonely it must get in the spirit world sometimes.

Claw smiled in relief. “Good. Well, I just thought I’d visit you now to try to pull you out of your nightmare. It seemed particularly gruesome.”

Saderia winced and let out a soft sigh. “It was. Thank you.” She paused, then looked up with a curious frown. “There’s nothing you need to tell me, though, right? There’s no danger?”

Claw chuckled and shook her head. “No, there’s no danger, Saderia. You can relax. I just wanted to pull you out of your nightmare and let you know that I’ll be watching over you while you’re sleeping. Maybe that will help you a bit.”

Saderia gave her a grateful smile. “Thanks. Maybe it will.”

“I hope so. I don’t want you to have to be afraid anymore, Saderia.” She paused, then let out a quiet sigh and offered her a weak smile. “You should probably go back to sleep and try to get some rest now. Hopefully, you’ll have a more peaceful sleep. Although...” With a tense frown, she trailed off nervously, her eyes narrowing and darkening with unease.

Saderia frowned, feeling a sting of worry in the pit of her stomach. “What? What’s wrong?”

Claw looked away and quickly shook her head, avoiding her eyes. “Nothing’s wrong. There’s just something...something I want to

investigate. I don't think it's a major concern right now, and I don't think it's very dangerous, but...I just want to check on something." Seeing Saderia's uneasy frown, she looked up and managed a tight smile. "It's nothing for you to worry about, Saderia. If it was, I would tell you. Don't worry about it. You've got enough on your plate with trying to figure out how to get along with Dash again and how to get a good night's sleep."

Saderia winced and hesitated, then just nodded with a soft sigh, trusting her spirit guide to know what was best for her. "Okay...But...what exactly are you looking into?"

Claw shrugged and gazed absently around at the sleepy desert landscape. "A few things, actually. All of them relate to the spirit realm in some way, so you could call them my own personal errands to run. When I look into them, if anything happens that could affect you in some way, I'll take care of it and keep you posted, all right?"

Saderia managed a faint smile and nodded. "All right." Even though she still felt curious as to what kind of ghostly business Claw might have to look into, she decided to just let the topic drop. Claw had always been reluctant to talk to her about the goings-on in the spirit realm, and she was used to her ghostly friend keeping otherworldly secrets from her that she probably wouldn't understand. She let out a soft sigh and smiled at her spirit guide. "Talk to me if you need help with any of these things you're dealing with. In the meantime, goodbye, Claw."

Claw managed a bright smile. "Goodbye, Saderia. And goodnight."

Saderia smiled back at the spirit guide. Letting her eyes slip shut, the tiger slowly started to fade from view. In a few seconds, she vanished into the thick, sleepy air of the spirit realm, leaving Claw standing alone in the vast sea of tall, rolling sand dunes. Slowly, the light spirit's eyes narrowed with a dark sense of dread. For a long moment, she stared at the place where Saderia had disappeared, lost in thought and tense with unease. She hadn't wanted to alarm Saderia, but something was badly wrong in the land of the dead—something she was beginning to fear would affect the living.

A dark scowl crossed her face. Taking a deep breath, she slowly tore her eyes off the place where Saderia had vanished and turned to pad through the endless sea of sand dunes, heading in the direction of the ghostly version of the forest that she knew sat right on the edge of the

desert. Determination glowed in her light brown eyes. Whatever was happening in the spirit realm, it was her job to find out just what was going on and stop it before it reached the living world.

Chapter Eleven

History

Dark shadows covered the sleepy, ethereal atmosphere of the ghostly land. With flashing amber eyes, a dark spirit padded along a ghostly path through a copse of woods so thick and shadowy it was nearly pitch black. Winding through the maze of stark black trees, the dark spirit stalked along the old dirt path, heading deeper into parts of the ghostly forest he had never known about before—parts most spirits tended to avoid. The typical atmosphere hovering over the land of the dead was dark and oddly dreamlike, but deeper in the shadows of the ghostly forest where most of the dead dared not walk, the dark ambience carried an eerie threat that was enough to scare off most of even the dead.

The spirit had heard tales about certain...strange areas within the land of the dead such as the one he was investigating now. Whispered in hushed voices by spirits who thought no one was listening, the stories told of dark, dreary parts of the spirit realm's forest where evil spirits reduced to nothing but pure shadows with cold, glinting eyes flew through the air like a swarm of shrieking bats. Some ghosts said that only spirits with true evil in their hearts could even enter such dark areas of the spirit realm. Others said that those with pure hearts who dared enter such forbidden places came out with malice in their eyes. Or they never came out at all. Some said that ghosts could disappear into complete nonexistence in such places. Others said some ghosts were banished into the darkest parts of the forest, hidden away from the rest of the ghosts in the spirit realm and forced to remain in inactivity forever until someone from the living world reawakened them.

The dark spirit had never paid much attention to such tales he had deemed ridiculous, but now they were all he could think about. Now that he had begun to investigate certain aspects of his ancestry and certain qualities of the spirit realm, the stories were no longer quite so hard to believe. A faint sneer tugged at the corners of the spirit's mouth as he stalked down the shadowy path, his pitch black mane billowing out behind him. These dark,

forbidden places feared by spirits all throughout the land of the dead could hold all the answers he longed to find.

Ever since he had learned about the ancient books that had been stolen from him, he had longed to find some of his own ancestors to question them about the old texts, but that had presented to him a new perplexing problem. No matter where he looked in the ghostly version of the vast forest, he could never find a single one of his ancestors, old or young. Oddly enough, it had also been difficult to find Saderia's ancestors, though he hadn't searched as hard for them—he doubted they wanted to speak to him. After searching so hard and finding no one at all, he had begun to wonder if some of his ancestors—if not all of them—had gone into hiding in the dark, dreaded places whispered about by the purer ghosts of the spirit realm. The assumption seemed logical enough. As for the Princess's ancestors, he didn't have a clue where they might be. Perhaps there were some lighter areas of the spirit realm where only the truly righteous were allowed.

Dastarius's eyes flashed through the shadows as he stepped deeper into one of the darkest places in the spirit realm. At the sound of a soft, eerie hissing noise, he paused and looked up to find the source of the sound. Peering through the thick tangle of dead trees rising up on the left side of the path, he looked up just in time to see a tiny pitch black shadow slither away from him. His eyes narrowed. Keeping his expression carefully composed, he glanced to the right of the path where a flock of shadows danced through a clump of eerie, blackish bushes, letting out soft, cackling hisses. Their glowing red eyes flashed malevolently through the murky trees, watching him. Narrowing his eyes, Dastarius turned away from the cackling shadows and turned to look down at the path beneath his paws. With every step he took, the shadowy path seemed to twist and distort with the shadows that flew across the dirt and the light that pierced through the pitch black canopy of leaves above him, like something being tortured. The thick, dusky air around him seemed to echo with malicious whispers of the past and the present. If he listened hard enough, he could just make out words amongst the hissing and whispering of the darkness.

“Welcome, new shadow.”

With a faint frown, Dastarius took a step forward, then paused in the middle of the warping path. By now, it was clear. The stories he had heard

about the darkest, evilest places hidden away in the spirit realm had not been mere stories.

Pitch black against the dreary scenery, bodiless shadows whisked past him and danced through the dark woods on either side of the path, cackling and hissing eerie, unintelligible tales before dissipating into the dark, empty gray air around them. The air itself seemed practically made of darkness. While the rest of the spirit realm was always dark and shadowy, it was tinged with a more peaceful, sleepy blue glow. Here, in the most forbidden area of the ghostly forest, the bleak grayness and sheer darkness haunting the woodsy path around him made the rest of the spirit realm seem like the sunniest place in the world.

All of the lush, blooming trees that dotted the rest of the spirit realm's forest had vanished. Nothing but black, skeletal dead trees rose up on either side of the bleak gray path, just as thick and entangled as the rest of the trees in the forest, but infinitely darker. Scars marred the dark gray bark of every tree. Their stark, leafless branches were warped and twisted and seemed to only distort more and more as he watched them. Even the twisting path and the few sprigs of dead grass drooping over it looked dark gray and lifeless. His own paws—normally a deep, dark brown—were a duller shade of gray with only a lifeless hint of brown beneath the darkness. It was as if all the color had been sucked out of this new, eerie place, leaving only darkness and death behind.

Holding his head higher and refusing to fear the shadows, he turned to walk deeper into the dark woods, following the warping path and ignoring the hissing of the darkness. With narrowed eyes, he gazed at the land ahead, searching for any sign of a ghost he could actually speak to. Through the shadows whisking across the dark woods before him, he caught sight of something up ahead.

When he drew closer, he could just make out a tall formation of pitch black boulders stacked one on top of the other. A sort of makeshift cave made out of dark rocks with a wide gap in the front to act as an entrance, the dark formation sat at the back of a tiny gray clearing at the end of the twisting path. No grass covered the clearing where the path ended. Only dirt. Around the edges of the clearing, the dead trees seemed to grow even thicker and more entangled. Shadows whisked all throughout the

clearing, sweeping in and out of the dark woods and filling the air with their soft, eerie hisses.

Dastarius's eyes narrowed. With a curious frown, he hesitated for only a moment before stepping off the path and stalking out into the bleak clearing. Staying tensed and alert for any sign of attack, he slowly crept up to the gaping entrance of the rock formation and peered into the shadowed, murky depths of the cave, his amber eyes gleaming through the darkness. "Hello? Is anyone there?"

Two bright amber eyes suddenly flashed through the darkness in the deepest depths of the cave, gleaming with equal amounts of curiosity and caution. Instinctively, Dastarius took a step back when the eyes flashed to his face. Taking a few cautious steps backward, Dastarius raised his head and faced the creature inside the cave as calmly as possible, his tone low but even. "Are you...one of those shadows?"

For a long, tense moment of silence, the thing hidden inside the cave stared at him with wide, unblinking eyes and didn't respond. After what felt like a lifetime, the two glowing eyes slowly closed, breaking the spell between them. When Dastarius pricked his ears and listened closely, he could just barely detect the sound of raw, grating laughter echoing from somewhere inside the shadows of the cave.

"You must be one of the new ones." A low, rasping voice rumbled out from the depths of the cave. Before Dastarius could react, the eyes fluttered open again. Slowly, the glowing amber irises drew closer, growing bigger and bigger as the creature stepped closer to him. With a grating wheeze, a dark brown lion with a frayed, scruffy black mane and a kinky tail staggered out from the depths of the cave and shook himself as if to wake himself up. With a strange mixture of curiosity and nonchalance in his glowing amber eyes, the lion looked Dastarius over and let a faint, crooked grin creep up the side of his dirty face, making the unkempt brown fur sticking up all over his muzzle seem even messier.

"I'm not a shadow," he growled. "Not yet anyway." A guttural chuckle rumbled in his throat and a knowing gleam flashed in his eyes as he looked Dastarius over. "You must be another one of my sons."

Dastarius blinked in surprise, then narrowed his eyes and studied him curiously, feeling a strange sense of familiarity at the sight of the unkempt lion. He looked like a much, much older—and extremely less

cleanly—version of himself. “You’re my ancestor,” he guessed. “How old are you?”

The unkempt lion shrugged with a faint grin. “I stopped counting after the first five hundred years or so.” He paused, then glanced at Dastarius with a curious smile and a mild flick of his tail. “I take it you’re new here. You’ve got the look of a newbie.” He chuckled to himself. “You’ve probably got some questions, huh?”

Dastarius narrowed his eyes, but nodded as calmly as possible. “Yes.” Sitting back on the bleak dirt, he curled his tail calmly over his paws and faced him evenly. It seemed this lion—his ancestor—was a lot more civilized than he had expected. Perhaps he could answer his questions. “For starters, I want to know what this place is. Are you the only one who lives here?” When the soft hisses of the shadows whisking around them suddenly grew louder and sharper, he looked up in surprise, then scowled and gestured to them with an annoyed flick of his tail. “Apart from...them.”

While the shadows calmed and resumed their quiet hissing, the lion snickered in a raw, grating voice, sensing Dastarius’s discomfort. “Ah, the shadows.” His eyes glimmered with knowing. “You’ll get used to them after a few years, son. After a while, it’s like they’re not even here.”

Dastarius narrowed his eyes and tensely flicked his tail. “Yes, well, I actually have no real intention of staying here, but I do want some information about this place.”

“Ah.” The spirit grinned with a knowing snicker and merely shrugged. “I see. No matter. You’ll wind up back here eventually. They all do.” He grinned a lopsided grin, his eyes half-lidded slits. With a frown, Dastarius wondered if he was insane. A few hundred years of being dead and most likely isolated had probably taken its toll. Still, even if he was crazy, he was currently Dastarius’s only source of information. He might be a little off, but he might also have useful things to say.

With an amicable smile, the frazzled old spirit sat back and tipped his head to the side to face him. “As for your other questions, no, I’m not the only one here besides the shadows, son. There are many more of my sons and fathers living here, but I tend to stay away from them. A lot of them are a hateful sort. You hang around those types too long, you might just turn into one of them.” He gestured to the whisking shadows with a grimace. “As for what this place is...that, I can’t answer, son. I don’t think

anyone could ever truly answer that. This place...it's where our family and its...friends have resided after death for centuries. Our kind doesn't like to be around the other spirits of the land of the dead, and frankly, the other spirits don't like to be around us, so here is where we stay. I'm sure there are other places like this one...colorless, shadowy...but we don't belong there either. This is our home." He paused to glance around at his dreary surroundings, then slowly looked back at Dastarius with a faint, glowing grin. "Speaking of which...welcome, son."

Dastarius frowned and quickly took a step back, his eyes narrowing. "I don't belong here. I don't know why any of you choose to stay here."

The spirit shrugged. "It's a complicated feeling. I don't think any of us truly like it here, but it's all we've got. Some of us can't leave. Which reminds me...I suppose I should warn you." His eyes flashed through the shadows. "If you stay here too long, son, there's no way you can ever return to the rest of the land of the dead. You'll be stuck here forever."

Dastarius blinked in surprise and cast a guarded glance around at his surroundings, his eyes narrowing in a cold glare. "I'll take my chances. After all, the spirit realm has already proven that some of its most important 'rules' can be bent."

"Really?" The ancient spirit leaned forward with a glimmer of interest in his eyes. "So you've already figured out some of the mysteries of the spirit realm—at such a young age?" Catching the surprised gleam in Dastarius's eyes, the dark spirit chuckled and shook his head. "Some of us here have been trying to figure this place out for centuries. Congratulations to you for uncovering some of its mysteries so soon. What rules have you managed to bend, and what have you found out about the spirit world?"

"Actually, that's what I wanted to talk to you about." With a careful frown, Dastarius flicked his tail toward the land around him and cautiously met the spirit's gaze. "You've been here for a long time. In all honesty, I only managed to stumble across some ways to bend some of the rules by accident. I don't know how things work here—and I really need to know that."

The spirit leaned back with a faint smile and a soft chuckle. "Curiosity. I had almost forgotten that trait—even though it's what brought most of us here." He flicked his tail with a faint grin and just shrugged. "Very well, son. I will tell you all I know, but keep in mind that even though

I am centuries old, I still have not managed to unravel many of the mysteries of this world. Animals much better and older than you—better and older even than me—have tried to uncover these secrets and failed. Most of them are around us now.” With a lopsided sneer, he gestured to the dark beings whisking around him.

“The shadows,” Dastarius guessed. When the frazzled spirit nodded, he narrowed his eyes with a dark, curious frown. “Tell me...father...just how did these...things come to be?”

“That’s hard to answer,” the spirit replied with a shrug and a glance at the dark shadows. “No one really knows, though many have come up with theories.” Absently, he flicked his tail toward the dark beings and raised an eyebrow. “The last time I checked—a few hundred years ago—shadows like these didn’t roam the rest of the spirit world. Is that still the case?” When Dastarius nodded, his ancestor just smiled. “They only seem to roam here and perhaps in other dark places like ours. From what we’ve witnessed and uncovered, it seems that ghosts like you and I become these strange shadow beings after long periods of time have passed—hundreds and hundreds of years. You don’t need to worry about it too much, though, son. That’s hundreds of years down the road, after all, and not *all* of us become shadows.

“Some of us have come up with a few ideas about the shadows. Our theory is that a ghost becomes a shadow after they’ve spent hundreds of years here with bitterness and hatred in their hearts. Most of the shadows you see around you had hated enemies that they tried to take revenge on—and failed. For hundreds of years, they were bitter and hateful. Eventually, their own bitterness got the best of them and they became mere shadows of themselves. It’s not an immediate transformation. I knew a ghost before he became a shadow, and I could see it in him—in his eyes—a few weeks before he became one. It’s just another mystery of the spirit realm.”

Dastarius nodded slowly and studied his ancestor curiously through narrowed eyes. Particularly, he peered at the spirit’s eyes as discreetly as possible. Oddly enough, the ancient lion kept his eyes half-lidded and narrowed, as if he were trying to hide them from him. When Dastarius peered closely into their bright amber depths, he could see why. If his theory was true, then he was probably already becoming a shadow. His eyes seemed to glow with a bright amber shine in the darkness the same way the

shadows' did. Yet at the same time, when he looked into the lion's dark pupils, he saw no light in his eyes. Nothing but pitch blackness darkened his eyes, while an eerie, otherworldly amber glow surrounded their dark depths. A faint, dark glow seemed to shimmer around the edges of his ancestor himself, not just his eyes. The dark edges of his messy black mane seemed to warp and twist the same way the shadows did.

"Eerie," he murmured, eyeing his ancestor with a guarded frown. "What else can you tell me about the land of the dead?"

The scraggly spirit shrugged. "I'm sure you already know the rules. You can't talk to the living. You can't touch anything in the living world. You can't injure ghosts or the living... You can't do anything, essentially."

"Yes, essentially." Dastarius's eyes flashed and he coolly flicked his tail, a knowing gleam in his amber irises. "But I've managed to find a way to break the first rule... although I don't necessarily know how."

The spirit's eyes widened in surprise. "You've talked to one of the living?" When Dastarius nodded, the spirit blinked in surprise and stared at him in shock, his shadow-like eyes now wide with disbelief. "Who?" he breathed. "Not one of the royal family?"

Dastarius paused and blinked in surprise, his eyes narrowing. "You know of the royal family?"

The dark spirit snorted. "Of course. The royal family's been around for centuries. All of us know about them." His eyes glimmered with knowing. "I take it you've had your own experiences with them."

Dastarius blinked several times, then narrowed his eyes and slowly looked down at his paws, a low growl rumbling in his throat. "Let's just say... the current royal Princess is a very irritating thorn in my side that I can never seem to shake off." He gritted his teeth. "I almost had her, too, but she managed to outsmart me."

"Ah." The spirit nodded his head with a knowing, sardonic smile. "Say no more, my son. We've all been there." As he spoke, the shadows let out sharper, more malevolent hisses in unison, their eyes flashing hatefully through the darkness. Catching the stunned look in Dastarius's eyes, the spirit let out a soft chuckle that ended in a sigh. "Let's just say that our family's enmity with the royal family goes way back."

Dastarius's eyes widened in shock. "Even our ancestors hated them?"

The spirit nodded with a sigh, his eyes flashing through the shadows. "Yes. For very good reason, too." His voice grew so soft and wistful Dastarius could barely hear it over the hissing of the shadows. "They stole something very precious to us many centuries ago. Or so the stories say." He paused, then looked up with a curious frown, seeming to shake off his thoughts. "Anyway, who was it you spoke to in the living world? It couldn't be one of the royal family since you hate them as much as the rest of us, so..." His eyes grew round with shock. "Does that mean there's another special animal living in the forest?"

Dastarius blinked and frowned in bewilderment. "Special animal?"

The spirit tipped his head to the side in confusion. "You don't know?" When Dastarius just narrowed his eyes with a mystified frown, the scraggly spirit shrugged and glanced out at the dark clearing with thoughtful eyes. "It's a story that's passed around everywhere in the land of the dead...at least the last time I checked. The story says that in almost every generation, there is usually at least one special animal born in the living world. We call them 'special' because they have the power to see us and speak to us. The chances of a special animal being born are...less than one in a million—probably less than one in a *billion*. However, when an animal is born in the royal family, the chances of it being special are much, much higher, which is why in every generation for the past hundred years, the only special animals that have been born have belonged to the royal family. Mind you, not every member of the royal family can actually see ghosts. Some can only see the future. It's much rarer for an animal—even one in the royal family—to be able to see ghosts." He paused, then looked up with a curious frown. "So who was the living animal you spoke to?"

Dastarius frowned and gazed absently out at the shadowy clearing, taking in everything he had heard and trying to figure out what it could mean. "It was my son," he murmured, lost in thought.

The spirit's eyes widened in shock. "One of our family is special?"

"Sort of." With a deep frown, Dastarius slowly turned back to face the spirit, his eyes gleaming with curiosity. "He wasn't born 'special.' I remember spying on him from the land of the dead right after I died, and I know for a fact that I couldn't talk to him or contact him in any way then. It's only recently that he's suddenly acquired this power to see and speak to ghosts."

The ghost blinked at him in shock, his fur beginning to bristle with disbelief. “But...that’s impossible. In all these hundreds of years, nothing like that has ever happened before.”

“I have a theory about it.” With a cool glint in his narrowed amber eyes, Dastarius studied the spirit and frowned a deep, careful frown. “While my son was not special to begin with, I know an animal who was. The Princess. Through an unexpected turn of events that I prefer not to go into, the Princess became close friends with my son after I was already dead and unable to stop her. She is...very powerful. She can see spirits and the future. And she has many close friends. As of right now, at least two of them can clearly see ghosts like us. It is my theory that somehow the Princess can pass on her power to see ghosts to animals she spends lots of time with. Do you think that would be possible?”

“There’s...there’s never been anything like that, as far as I know,” the spirit stammered, his eyes round with shock and incredulity. “Before the Princess of your day, there were many Princesses, Princes, Queens, and Kings who could see ghosts throughout the centuries. But none of them ever managed to pass on their power to anyone else—not even their closest friends or spouses.”

“Odd,” Dastarius murmured, his eyes narrowed and lost in thought. “That may be true of other members of the royal family, but Princess Saderia is different. As far as I know, she is the most powerful member of the royal family to date. She’s...”

The spirit’s eyes grew wide. “The Daughter of the Fiftieth Generation...”

Dastarius froze and snapped up to look at him in shock, his eyes widening and his breath catching in his throat. “You know about that?”

For a long moment, his ancestor stared at him in shock, his eyes distant and hollow with incredulity. Slowly, he blinked several times as if to reacquaint himself with reality and quietly nodded his head, his face stark with seriousness. “Yes,” he whispered. “I’ve heard and read all the stories.” Blinking several times as if unable to believe what he had heard, he turned to gaze out at his surroundings with wide, mystified eyes, seeming lost in another world. His voice was so soft Dastarius could barely hear it. “So she’s finally here. The prophesied one, unifier of worlds, source and harbinger of the new revolution and the new world...”

Dastarius's eyes widened in shock at his subdued words and the fur along his back rose up in anticipation. Every part of him tensed with hope and excitement. He was getting closer to the history he had sought out. Saderia's history, ancestry, and prophecy lay deep within the mysteries of the past, most likely intertwined with the things he desperately needed to know. "What do you mean by that?" he demanded. "What do you know about...the Daughter of the Fiftieth Generation?"

To his disappointment, his ancestor narrowed his eyes and slowly shook his head, lost in thought. "I'm sorry, son, but I don't know much. All I know are a few old stories that I didn't even believe were true when I first heard them. It's nothing specific. It's more or less what I just told you—that someday, one member of the royal family would rise up and lead the way to a new world after being chosen by an ancient prophecy made by..."

"Queen Tarae," Dastarius finished, his voice as soft and mystified as his ancestor's.

The ragged spirit paused and stared at him with dark, unreadable eyes for a long moment before slowly nodding his head, a dark, tense shadow on his face. "Yes. But from what I've heard...Queen Tarae wasn't the only one to prophesy the Daughter's future."

Dastarius's eyes widened in shock and he instantly took a step closer, his amber irises bright with curiosity. "What do you mean? There was only one prophecy in Tarae's tomb—I was there. And every last tidbit of history points to there only being one prophecy—Tarae's prophecy."

A wry, bitter smile crossed the spirit's face. "The other prophesier wouldn't exactly hide his prophecy in his enemy's tomb, son. And as you'll come to find out...history only tells you what it wants you to know..."

"Leave this place, do-gooder!" A dark, wispy shadow spat the words through the air with an eerie hiss and a flash of its glowing red eyes before vanishing into the air, leaving behind an eerie sense of disquiet.

Shaking off a shiver of fear, Claw narrowed her eyes and delicately stepped forward to continue following the warping, twisting path through the dark forest of dead trees. Fear streaked through her as evil, bodiless shadows whisked past her on all sides, but she forced herself to keep her head up and keep moving, reminding herself that they couldn't hurt her.

Slowly, she crept farther along the dark path, heading deeper and deeper into the eerie patch of woods.

Her translucent light brown fur seemed to shimmer in the dim light as though it were some sort of lantern guiding her through the darkness. The sparks shimmering off her fur only made her feel more conspicuous. Her paws seemed to glow with a faint white light as she glided along the dreary path. Wherever she stepped, the lifeless gray path seemed to light up with a warmer, more familiar dirty brown color for one fleeting second. Every tree she passed by seemed to flicker into a lively, proud tree with deep brown bark and a full canopy of glistening leaves before the vision disappeared along with the light of her sparkling fur. The visions flickered before her eyes in such brief, fleeting instants she wondered if they weren't just her imagination.

Swallowing back a wave of fear, Claw forced herself to keep moving and gazed around at the eerie place, searching for any sign of the dark lion with the pitch black mane and flicking black-tufted tail she had seen slip into the sinister place earlier. With every step, she wondered what eerie business Dastarius might have in such a creepy place. Whatever it was, it wasn't anything good—that much was clear. She didn't expect him to stay true to his promise not to cause any more trouble either.

At the sound of soft voices—the first she had heard that didn't sound like the high, eerie whispers of the shadows—she paused and hastily pricked her ears. Through a swirl of shadows whisking around her, she could just make out a dark brown lion with a pitch black mane standing in a dreary clearing just a few feet away from her outside of a dark cave, speaking to a ragged old lion that looked like an older, more battered version of himself. Their hushed voices seemed to whisper in the same eerie rhythm as the hissing of the shadows.

Claw's heart leapt with hope. Even though she knew Dastarius was just as creepy and malevolent as the shadows whisking around her, she couldn't help but feel relieved to see a somewhat familiar face in this evil place. "Dastarius!" With a wild cry, she instantly darted toward him, her fur bristling with equal amounts of distrust and relief.

At the sound of her voice, Dastarius whipped around to face her just as she skidded to a halt in front of him and the tattered old lion. Surprise flashed in the dark lion's wide amber eyes. With a stunned gasp, he gaped at

her in shock, as if unable to believe what he was seeing. “Claw?” Blinking several times, he stared at her in incredulity, then slowly narrowed his eyes with a low, dangerous growl. “What are you doing here?”

“I followed you.” Narrowing her eyes, Claw took a step closer to Dastarius and scowled, trying to ignore the surprised, intrigued stare of Dastarius’s scraggly companion. “And I’d like to know what *you* are doing in a place like this.”

Dastarius let out a long hiss of annoyance, his shock fading into frustration. “Leave it to an annoying pest like you to always butt in where you’re not wanted...” Rolling his eyes, he pressed a paw to his forehead with a long-suffering sigh, trying to control his anger.

Claw flattened her ears and shot him a cold glare. “Save your breath and spare me the insults. Just tell me what you’re doing here and what kind of scheme you’re concocting this time.”

“I’ve got no scheme,” Dastarius growled with a dry scowl, his amber eyes flashing with annoyance. “Is it too much to ask to speak in private to one of my own ancestors? Or are you going to spy on me if I decide to drop in on my own father, too?” When Claw narrowed her eyes in a suspicious glare, Dastarius just sighed and rolled his eyes. “I’m not *up* to anything. All I want to do is learn more about my past. You’ve got no right to butt into my own personal existence and start asking questions, and you’ve got no right to spy on me. I already told you I’d leave your precious Princess alone, so why don’t you get off my back and leave me to enjoy the remainder of my eternity?”

Claw narrowed her eyes with a scowl, her fur bristling with anger. Part of her wanted to press him for answers, knowing he wasn’t telling the whole truth. As she glared up into his blazing amber eyes, though, she knew it was pointless. No matter what she asked Dastarius, she wasn’t going to get any answers. Gritting her teeth, she glared up at him with every bit of fire she could kindle for a long moment of silence, then reluctantly looked away. With a long sigh, she glared down at her paws and just shook her head, feeling her shoulders sag with defeat. “Fine,” she muttered. “Just show me how to get out of this creepy place then, and stay away from my friends.”

“Gladly.” With an exaggerated roll of his eyes, Dastarius carelessly flicked his tail toward the dark path she had stepped out from. “Just follow

that path and stay on it. Eventually, you'll get out."

"What about all the turns I had to take to get here?" Claw snapped, narrowing her eyes and feeling an uncomfortable prickle of unease. "It's not easy to get here, you know."

"I think I can help." With a lingering curious gleam in his odd, glowing eyes, Dastarius's ancestor leaned closer to Claw and studied her thoughtfully, seeming to try to peer right into her soul. "Follow that path, as he said, but at all turns, take a right. Miss a turn, and you're doomed. And try not to linger too long, or you'll never get out."

Claw blinked in surprise and tried to suppress a shiver at his soft words. With a nervous frown, she eyed the spirit warily, debating whether or not she could believe him. Before she could give life to her misgivings, Dastarius's scraggly ancestor leaned closer to her with a curious grin and studied her intently, an almost admiring gleam in his eyes.

"Not many of your good-doing kind have the nerve to come here... Claw, was it?" His eyes glimmered in the darkness and a curious grin twitched at the corners of his mouth. "I'm curious to know what your story is."

"Well, we're all curious about things." Giving Dastarius's ancestor a cool, guarded look, she slowly turned back to look up at Dastarius himself, her eyes narrowed and shadowed with tension. For a long moment, she studied the lion darkly, as if warning him that the consequences would be grave if he led her astray in the creepy forest. When Dastarius simply stared back at her with a careless frown and raised eyebrows, Claw let out a sigh.

Feeling her shoulders sag with defeat, she narrowed her eyes at the ground, knowing she had no choice but to trust the eerie lions. Giving them one last, dark look, she took a few steps back, then reluctantly turned around. Slowly, she took a deep breath, then tensely stalked back toward the dark, shadowy path to weave her way back to the light. Just as she stepped into the shadows, she cast one last glance back at Dastarius. Seconds later, she crept deeper into the dark, dead forest and vanished from sight, leaving Dastarius and his odd ancestor alone.

With a deep scowl, Dastarius glared at the place where Claw had disappeared, his tail twitching tensely back and forth in annoyance. Biting back a sigh, he slowly turned back to face his ancestor to apologize for the intrusion, but never got the chance.

“I’ve never seen one of her kind before.” With glowing amber eyes, the scraggly old lion stared at the place where Claw had disappeared, his face shining with wonder and curiosity. Slowly, he looked up to meet Dastarius’s eyes questioningly. “Is she one of the animals who live in the place next to the forest?”

Dastarius’s eyes widened in surprise. “The desert?” When his ancestor shrugged and nodded, he narrowed his eyes in disbelief, unable to hide the shock in his tone. “How do you know about that? The forest animals only recently found out about the desert and the other places beyond the forest—and only because the Princess explored them first.”

His ancestor merely shrugged. “I didn’t know what exactly lay beyond the forest—no one does—but I had heard stories about there being other places with different kinds of animals scattered all around our land. There was something about their history being intertwined with ours at some point in history and something about how they’ll contribute to the new world somehow, but I can’t remember it all. It’s been hundreds of years since I read those stories in our ancestor’s old books.” He paused, then glanced after Claw with a wondering gleam in his eyes. “Who is she? *What is she?*”

“That was Claw,” Dastarius murmured, his voice distracted and his eyes clouded with thought. “She’s dead, a dingo, and Princess’s ‘spirit guide.’ She visits the Princess in her dreams and tells her things to help her out. That, and she’s gotten spying on others’ business down to a science...”

The scraggly ghost chuckled softly, his shadow-like eyes glinting in the darkness. “I see.” He paused, then let a slow frown creep across his face, his eyes growing darker with seriousness. “She’s the spirit guide of the Daughter, huh?”

Dastarius nodded absently, too caught up in his thoughts to really hear his ancestor’s words. “Yeah. But enough about her.” With a more curious frown, he looked back to meet the ghost’s eyes with glinting amber irises. “What were you saying about those books you read? There are these books in my old house that I’ve been wanting to read, but unfortunately, I can’t. Are those the same ones?”

His ancestor winced sympathetically. “Ah, so that’s why you’re here. I’m sorry to tell you, son, but it’s been centuries since I read those books back when I was alive. It’s all a blur by now. If you want to know

more about our history, you'll have to look somewhere else. But I warn you..." The spirit's glowing amber eyes flashed in the shadows with a strange, eerie sense of darkness and danger. "Better animals than you have tried for centuries upon centuries to discover the secrets of our past, only to fail. It's a near impossible task, son. The royal family's ancestors were careful in making our own history very difficult to find."

Dastarius blinked in surprise. "The royal family?"

His ancestor nodded seriously, his eyes growing darker and colder. "Trust me, son, they've worked hard for centuries to keep our past hidden and buried in the fabric of time so that no one could *ever* find it again—so that no one could ever know the truth. The royal family has worked very hard to hide one of its oldest and darkest secrets."

"Really?" Dastarius leaned closer to his ancestor with wide, curious eyes, feeling almost numb with anticipation. "What is it?"

"No one knows for sure," the spirit murmured, his voice hushed and subdued. "But according to the legends of our ancestors...Queen Tarae wasn't the first ruler of the forest." When Dastarius's eyes widened in shock, the spirit lowered his voice and continued. "No one knows the details, but some say there is a deep, dark secret from the past that traces all the way back to *our* oldest ancestor. Danto."

Dastarius stared at him in wonder, hardly daring to speak in a voice louder than a whisper. "Danto?"

The spirit nodded seriously, his eyes growing darker with awe and tension. "You probably already know the legends and stories about the royal family's oldest ancestor, Tarae, and her magical prophecies and such. But we had an ancestor with some dark secrets, as well. No one knows much about him, just that he was very powerful and that he started something long ago that would one day come to fruition far, *far* in the future. His own power rivaled that of Queen Tarae. Legend has it that he was in control of some sort of powerful organization back in ancient times and that he prophesied the coming of the Daughter moments before he died. Other than that, not much is known about him—just that he is very, very important."

"Is he here?" Dastarius demanded. "In this place?"

To his dismay, the spirit frowned and slowly shook his head. "No, son. Our kind have been searching for him for centuries and have never found him. Not just here either, but *everywhere*. He is nowhere to be found,

the same as Queen Tarae. They're not shadows like the ones around us either. Neither of them seem to exist in this realm, and no one is sure how or why that is. It only adds to their mystique, I suppose."

Dastarius blinked several times in surprise, then narrowed his eyes, feeling an overwhelming sense of wonder and urgency. "But this...Danto... he knew Queen Tarae?"

The spirit nodded with a faint, wry smile. "Yes. As legend has it, he knew her *very* well...but the details are lost to history."

Dastarius bit back a sigh and merely nodded, his mind whirling wildly with everything he had heard. *Danto...* Was that one of the names he would find in those ancient books if he ever found a way to read them? Was there really a secret surrounding his oldest ancestor? And could it really affect things in the future...? "I've got to find out more about this..." With an almost obsessive gleam in his eyes and a frantic sense of urgency in his voice, he whipped around to face his ancestor with wide, desperate eyes. "You. You can't tell me anything more, but do you know anyone who can?"

The spirit narrowed his eyes and slowly shook his head with a dark, regretful frown. "I'm afraid not, son." He paused, then looked down at the ground, a flicker of fire flashing in his glowing amber irises. "The royal family buried all traces of our history, and no one in the forest—both in the real world and the spirit realm—knows anything about our ancestry. But..." A faint glow suddenly lit up his eyes and he lifted his head with a hopeful frown, his scruffy tail beginning to twitch tensely back and forth. "...That's only in the forest. As legend has it...some of the descendants of Danto's accomplices and friends would manifest in the future and supposedly know some degree of information about him and their own ancestors. Legend says these descendants would only come and be of use after the arrival of the Daughter...Now that she's here, you've got a good chance of finding and speaking with some of them, if they truly do exist."

Dastarius looked up sharply, his amber eyes growing wide with wonder and determination. "Do you have any idea who these descendants could be?"

Slowly, the spirit shook his head, though a faint glow of wonder and curiosity glowed in his odd, shadow-like eyes. "No, son...but I might be able to give you a clue. You see, when I first heard the legend, I thought the descendants had to be forest animals, but now that I think about it...there's

a much higher chance that these descendants are animals from some of the other places outside the forest. Like that thing you were just speaking to.”

Dastarius blinked in surprise. “The dingoes?”

His ancestor nodded rapidly, a wide grin spreading across his face. “Yes.” He paused and narrowed his eyes in thought, then slowly looked up, a sly, knowing gleam shining in his amber irises. “That Claw dingo you were just speaking to seemed pretty sure of herself. Where she comes from, did she hold any position of power or importance when she was alive?”

Dastarius frowned in bewilderment, then merely shrugged. “They have a thing called a Leader there. It’s pretty much the same as being a King in the forest, just with a different title. Claw was the Leader’s daughter—like a Princess—but other than that, she’s nothing special. She doesn’t know anything of interest. I think I’d know if she did.”

The spirit nodded thoughtfully, barely noticing the confused, scornful tone of his voice. “Does she have any siblings or any other family members that you know of?”

Dastarius frowned and glanced distractedly down at his paws, absently counting out the number of Claw’s siblings on his claws. “She has...four brothers, I think.”

The scraggly lion’s eyes lit up with excitement. “Very interesting. Why don’t you start by checking them out first? I can’t guarantee you’ll find anything...but for her to be so close to the Daughter...there could be something very interesting about that family.”

Dastarius blinked in surprise, then slowly narrowed his eyes with a jolt of wonder and interest, realizing what he was saying. Meeting his ancestor’s glowing amber eyes, he nodded slowly, his mind whirling with possibilities. “I might do that...”

“Good.” His ancestor grinned a wide, eager grin, then paused. Slowly, his smile faded and a darker, more serious shadow crossed his face, making his eyes seem even darker than ever. “Just be careful where you go looking, son. This mystery has been enough to drive legions of animals before you mad. After a certain point, it becomes an obsession and leaves you empty and hollow when you find yourself always reaching for an answer that’s always just out of your reach. And if you do manage to discover the secrets of the past...the consequences could be very, very grave.”

Dastarius narrowed his eyes at his soft, eerie words and merely flicked his tail with a guarded frown. “I’ll take my chances.” Without another word, he slowly rose to his paws and dipped his head to his ancestor, his amber eyes shimmering with excitement. “Thank you for the information, father. Now, if you don’t mind, I have a few leads I need to check out.”

His ancestor smiled and nodded. With one last look back at the ancient lion, Dastarius merely nodded to him and promptly turned to stalk away. In silence, he paced toward the shadowy path leading back to the rest of the spirit world, then paused when his ancestor’s rasping voice floated over to his ears.

“Just one more thing, son.” When Dastarius frowned and turned to look back at him, his ancestor coolly met his gaze with dark, serious amber eyes. A faint sneer tugged at the corners of his mouth. “If you’re really going to try to figure this mystery out...it’s best you keep the Daughter alive until you get there. If the legends are true, she’s working for your side, son. She just doesn’t know it yet.”

Chapter Twelve

Disappearance

Eyes bored into Saderia's skin from every direction, setting her fur on fire with panic and fear. Letting out a shaky breath, she spun around in a circle, but no matter where she looked, she could see no one peeking out at her. A blur of shadowy trees towered all around her, tangled together in thick copses that made it impossible to see through the mess of low-hanging branches. Pitch black undergrowth dotted the overgrown woods everywhere she looked, leaving the dark land beyond it draped in shadows. Everywhere she looked, eyes bored into her soul, yet no matter where she turned, she saw no one. The shadowy land around her was empty and silent.

Her heart skipped a beat. Without warning, a thunderous snarl suddenly boomed out behind her, raising all the fur on her back. Her eyes opened wide. With a deafening scream, she started to whirl around, but never got the chance. Before she could move an inch, a creamy yellow paw grabbed her from behind and covered her eyes. Darkness washed over her. With a strangled cry of pain and fear, Saderia squeezed her eyes shut just as the vision faded around her.

Thunder crashed above her the instant the world turned dark. Letting out a stunned gasp, Saderia opened her eyes and felt her heart skip a beat. Rain thundered down from the pitch black sky beyond the canopy over her head, splattering her fur with icy cold drops of water. Frozen in place, she stood on the edge of a huge hollow carved into the ground. Hundreds of hard, stony ridges spiraled down right before her eyes, making her head spin at the sight. At the very bottom, tall, sharp stones spiked up from the base of the hollow, threatening to stab any who fell.

Thunder roared and lightning crashed in front of her, blinding her in a wild blaze of yellow. Without warning, the ground dropped out beneath her just as the blinding flash faded away. Instantly, she flew through the air into the enormous gap in the ground, heading straight for the spikes at the

bottom of the hollow. Fear streaked through her and her mouth gaped open in a scream.

“Dash!”

Lightning crashed behind her with a deafening roar, but instead of yellow light, darkness swept out around her. With a wild scream, Saderia flew through the darkness, twisting and turning desperately to try to catch herself. Unable to stop herself, she plummeted through the darkness endlessly, feeling her heart race as air whipped past her. Whispers flitted through the air, murmuring in her ears and sending shivers down her spine. When Saderia looked closely at the darkness around her, she almost screamed again.

Eerie, glowing red eyes flashed out from the darkness surrounding her. It wasn’t just darkness either. Hundreds and thousands of tiny, bodiless shadow creatures whisked around her, their bright red eyes glinting through the blackness. Swirling together in a blur of darkness darker than night itself, the shadows flew all around her, whispering soft words of warning in her ears. A sinister cackling sound rose in the air, sending shivers all throughout her body. Whipping all around her, the shadows all suddenly hissed together in one high, cheerful voice that sent ice racing through her veins.

“Beware an old enemy, Daughter. Beware...”

Saderia’s heart skipped a beat. With a wild, terrified scream, she plummeted through the sea of cackling, hissing shadows, their voices ringing in her ears. Her own eyes squeezed shut to try to block out the voices, but no matter what she did, they only seemed to grow louder and louder until they echoed in her own mind. Her mouth gaped open in a shriek she couldn’t hear.

“Dash!” she pleaded. “Dingo! Help me!”

With a gasp, Dash jolted awake in bed, his heart racing and his fur bristling with panic. Taking in wild, deep gasps of air, he frantically whipped around to stare out at his shadowy surroundings, his eyes wide with alarm. Slowly, his dark room crept into focus, washing away the shadows of the nightmare he had just woken up from. Hardly daring to breathe, Dash gazed out at the room with wide eyes, desperately trying to

force his heartbeat to slow. After taking a shaky breath, he slowly forced himself to relax. Even so, an eerie feeling lingered after his nightmare.

Suppressing a shiver, Dash took a shaky breath and slipped down to the ground, tossing his blanket to the edge of the bed. Ignoring the cold touch of the shadowed blue carpet, he hastily crept toward the dark door to his room, trying to shake off the creepy feeling. With narrowed eyes and a nervous shiver, he quietly creaked open the door to his room and peered out into the hallway to see if anyone was up. When he gazed out into nothing but darkness in the hallway beyond his room, his heart sank. With not even a single glimmer of light to split through the darkness, he knew it must still be extremely early in the morning. He probably still had a few good hours until the sun rose.

Letting out an annoyed groan, Dash hesitated for a split second, then silently crept out through the doorway and turned to slink across the hallway to the door to Saderia's room. Even if he still felt awkward around her, he wanted to check on her and make sure she wasn't having nightmares. At the same time, he wondered what he would do if she was. Wake her up? He frowned and stifled a pang of unease. Would that help, or would it just make her feel even more terrified?

With a faint sigh, he forced the thoughts away and silently cracked open the door to her room to peer inside. Through the gap in the door, he could just barely see into Saderia's darkened room. Blinking several times, he poked his head in through the doorway and waited for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. When he could see through the thick shadows covering her room, he looked up at her bed and almost instantly winced. With her eyes squeezed shut tight, Saderia twisted and turned beneath her blanket, letting out tiny gasps and whimpers of fear. It was clear that nightmares were bothering her again.

Dash narrowed his eyes with a tense frown. For a long moment, he watched her in silence from the doorway, debating whether to wake her up or not. Just when he started to creep forward to wake her regardless of how she would react, he froze when she suddenly twisted around and let out a wild, desperate gasp. "Dingo! Help!" Wincing in her sleep, she thrashed across the bed in terror, throwing her blanket to the ground and burying her face in the pillow to block out the visions as the nightmare took an even worse turn.

Instantly, Dash stiffened at the mention of Dingo's name. Feeling almost numb and lifeless, Dash stared at her for a long moment with dark amber eyes, a dull, bitter shadow creeping across his face. After a tense moment of watching her, he slowly stepped out into the hallway and closed the dark door behind him, using all of his restraint not to slam it.

"Dingo..." With a low snarl, he curled his lip and stalked back into his room, his tail lashing furiously back and forth. Gritting his teeth, he shut his door sharply behind him and glared out into the darkness of his room, his fur bristling and his tail lashing with anger. Hatred burned in his chest. Baring his fangs, he glared at the shadows around him and let out a low, dangerous growl.

"I wish he was dead."

"Dash?"

At the sound of the soft, familiar voice, Dash blinked open his eyes and winced when a beam of sunlight flashed through the room. Gritting his teeth, he squinted against the bright morning sunlight filtering in through the window on the opposite side of his room. With a groggy yawn, he slowly pushed himself up on his bed beneath his messy blue blanket and struggled to see through the exhaustion clouding his eyes. When he made himself look up toward the door, he almost jumped when he made out a blurry orange figure standing just a few steps away from his bed.

His heart leapt with hope. Letting out a quiet gasp, he stumbled down from his bed and staggered clumsily across the floor. "Saderia?"

With a shaky breath, he stumbled awkwardly to a stop just a few paces away from his bed and looked up sharply, his eyes wide with surprise. When his vision cleared and he caught sight of the animal hovering just in front of him, his heart skipped a beat. Shock washed over him like a bucket of ice water and he took a hasty step backward. "K-Karenisha?"

The Queen stood just a few paces away from him in front of the open door to his room, her eyes wide and curious. Dash's heart sank as he looked up at her. Feeling his fur prickle with shame and discomfort at her curious gaze, he hastily looked away and turned to study the ground, his heart beating faster with guilt. Taking a deep breath, he avoided her bright amber gaze and nervously shuffled his paws, unable to hide the unease in his voice. "What...What are you doing here?"

Karenisha blinked once, then managed a weak smile. "Saderia asked me to wake you up for school. She left really early, about an hour ago. She said she didn't want to wake you up because you had been acting a bit odd lately and she thought you needed more sleep."

Dash blinked in surprise, then scowled and tensely flicked his tail, feeling a wave of bitterness and sorrow. She had left without him? Trying to shake off his annoyance, he just nodded and avoided the Queen's eyes. "Okay, Karenisha." He paused, then nervously flicked his tail. "I...I guess I'll just, uh...get going now..."

Karenisha just shrugged and nodded, stepping away from the doorway to let him pass. "All right. Have a good day at school."

Dash hesitated for a long moment, then just nodded and slowly stepped closer to her to walk through the doorway. Doing everything he could to avoid Karenisha's eyes, he reluctantly slipped past her and tried not to wince when his fur brushed hers. His skin prickled with discomfort, but at the same time, a strange feeling of curiosity and desperation kindled in his chest. When he stepped into the doorway behind the Queen, he paused for a tense moment, then slowly turned back around to face Karenisha. Before he could stop himself, he blurted out the one thing that was on his mind. "Karenisha...what do you remember about...the war?"

When he saw surprise flash across her face, he almost winced, feeling an overwhelming surge of guilt. A memory of the Queen's lifeless, horror-struck expression and battered appearance flickered through his mind, sending a jolt of pain and regret racing through him. Abruptly, he looked down and forcefully tried to shove the images out of his mind. The last thing he wanted was to remember Karenisha the way she had looked during the war when he had lived with Rock. He never wanted to remember that.

He didn't want to remember her dull, empty eyes, nor the air of terror and defeat that had seemed to hang over her like a cloud. He didn't want to think about the blood crusted around her face and paws as she had stared up at him with wide, confused eyes, silently asking what was going on. He didn't want to remember *anything* about Karenisha from that time. If he could just pretend like he had never seen her at all during the entire war, he would be much better off. It made it slightly easier to keep his sanity.

When he dared to look up at his foster mother, he almost winced with guilt. A dull, faraway look had crept into her eyes, making her face seem suddenly dark.

“I don’t remember much about it...” Speaking up in a soft, tense voice, the Queen gazed down at her paws with narrowed eyes, seeming lost in thought. “It was...all a blur. There were some things that happened...I don’t know if they were real or not. I imagined a lot of scary things back then, but they were all in my head. I was trapped in that prison in that camp for a long time, too. Sometimes I wonder if I just made up some of the things that happened...”

Dash blinked and dared to look up at her, his heart skipping with hope. As selfish as it was, he desperately hoped that Karenisha had somehow managed to forget what he had done. Or else decided to think of it as nothing more than a dream. In either case, both of them might be better off...

“Saderia and Makero have told me things about the war and what went on back then,” the Queen continued, her voice nothing more than a whisper. “They told me about their plans and how everyone was involved and what their roles were. How Saderia was in charge of the battle plans and the armies. How she had to run away and survive on her own after the plan fell apart. How she rescued Makero and the others from that prison thing in the forest—wherever that was. They never told me that. How you went to live with Rock.” She slowly shook her head. “Some of it still doesn’t make much sense to me, but I try not to think about it. After all, everything’s fine now, and that’s the only thing that matters, right?”

Dash blinked in surprise, then looked down and slowly nodded his head. “Right. So...” He hesitated, then made himself look up at her with hopeful eyes. “You don’t remember much about...what happened back when I was living with Rock?”

Karenisha just sighed and lowered her head. With dark, shadowed amber eyes, she turned to step past him and slipped out into the hallway, her gaze clouded and her shoulders slumped with defeat. Before she padded away down the long hallway, she murmured a few last words to the ground. “All I remember is that...it was like a nightmare...”

Dash slowly turned to stare after her as she stalked away from him, his heart skipping with dismay. Feeling numb with tension and guilt, he

stared after her with sad amber eyes. Bunny's words popped into his head as he watched her leave, and no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't shake them from his mind. Nor could he shake their eerie implications.

"You have blood in your claws..."

The words seemed to echo in his mind over and over again. Hollowly, he stared after Karenisha until she disappeared from sight behind the archway leading into the front room. His whole body felt tense with sadness and his eyes grew dark with regret. As he stared at the place where his foster mother had disappeared, he would have given anything to go back in the past and stop all this from happening. He didn't want blood on his paws. He didn't want Karenisha's suffering to hang over his head forever. He didn't want to be the bad guy. He didn't want to be hated.

"Saderia?"

At the sound of the familiar voice, Saderia jumped and whirled around, her heart skipping a beat. Surprise flashed in her eyes when she saw a familiar cheetah step up to her with green eyes wide with confusion. Slowly, she forced herself to relax even as her heart lurched with tension.

She stood in the shadows of the tall trees rising up around the wide clearing in front of the school building. Just a few paces away from the stairs leading up to the front doors of the school was a thick clump of bushes springing up by the edge of the building. For the past hour or so, Saderia had stood beside the thick undergrowth, partially hidden from any onlookers. Blinking sleep from her eyes, Saderia held up her paw in a half-hearted wave as her cheetah friend stalked closer to her and stopped just in front of her. Seeing the bewildered look in her narrowed green eyes, Saderia self-consciously directed her eyes to the ground, knowing all too well how horrible she looked with bloodshot eyes and disheveled fur she hadn't had the energy to brush.

Trying to stop her eyes from slipping shut, she tensely flicked her tail and gazed at the ground, avoiding her friend's eyes. "Hi, Loki." Out of the corner of her eye, she glanced back up at the school building and blinked in surprise when she realized the double doors had been propped open. A few tired students stumbled up the stairs into the building, murmuring to each other in soft, muted voices. Saderia blinked. After standing in the bushes waiting for the school to open for so long, she had

actually missed it. Her heart lurched with guilt at the thought. Earlier that morning, after waking up from a terrifying nightmare, she had decided to just walk to school and wait for it to open, not wanting to wake up Dash nor go back to sleep to let another nightmare terrorize her. She had hoped that the school would open soon and let her focus on learning instead of the turmoil in her life.

Loki narrowed her eyes in a bewildered frown. “How long have you been here?”

Saderia shrugged absently. “A while.”

Loki blinked in surprise, then narrowed her eyes and studied her with a curious scowl. “Why?”

Saderia just looked away and tensely flicked her tail. “I just couldn’t get back to sleep, I guess.”

Narrowing her eyes, Loki studied her for a long moment of silence, her expression clouded with doubt as if she could sense something was wrong. After a tense moment of silence, she just shook her head and looked away with a defeated sigh. “All right, if you say so.” She paused, then looked around at the clearing with a frown. “Where’s Dash?”

Saderia shrugged and looked away, her eyes flashing. “He was sleeping, so I just...left him behind. He’ll probably show up soon.”

Loki frowned and raised an eyebrow, giving Saderia a knowing look. “You’re mad at him, aren’t you? Because of that thing in the desert?”

Saderia sighed uncomfortably and avoided Loki’s knowing eyes. “Well...a little.” Boy, was that an understatement. Tensely, she flicked her tail and looked away. “Whatever, Loki, it was just a stupid fight. Dash and Dingo fight all the time...just not like that. Either way, I’ll get over it.”

Loki studied her closely, then just shrugged. “If you say so. I know you like to keep these things secret, but you know that if you want to talk about it, I’d be happy to listen.”

Biting back a sigh, Saderia forced herself to look up at her and managed a weak smile. “Thanks, Loki, but...I’m fine. Really.” She paused and studied the ground with narrowed eyes, then slowly looked back up at Loki. Biting back her discomfort, she opened her mouth to say something else to reassure her, then broke off when her eyes caught on a quick streak of brown fur. With a faint frown, she looked up just in time to see a dark

brown lion bound out from the woodsy path into the clearing around the school and look around with narrowed amber eyes.

Tensely, Saderia flicked her tail and frowned. "Dash just got here anyway." Out of the corner of her eye, she watched as Dash turned to look around and froze when he caught sight of her. Their amber eyes locked. Nervously, Saderia twitched her tail and looked away. "Maybe we should... go inside."

Loki glanced back over her shoulder at Dash, then just shrugged. When Saderia rose to her paws, the cheetah fell into step beside her and turned to follow her toward the steps leading up to the school building.

Turning her back on Dash, Saderia hastily stalked toward the stairs as fast as she could, wanting to avoid speaking to Dash. As quickly as possible, she bounded toward the steps with Loki close behind her, but didn't get a chance to reach them. Just before she stepped up onto the short staircase, Dash suddenly leapt out from behind her and bounded to a stop right in front of her and Loki, forcing them to stop in place.

When she and Loki stopped in front of him and looked up at him in surprise, Dash narrowed his eyes and flattened his ears, giving them a long, dark glare. "Hi, Saderia. Hi, Loki." In a voice strained with annoyance, he glanced back and forth between them, then turned and narrowed his eyes at Saderia. "I guess it's a good thing I managed to catch up with you. Any particular reason you decided to leave without me?"

Saderia just shrugged and studied the ground. "I just couldn't sleep, and I didn't want to wake you up." Narrowing her eyes, she hesitated, then looked up at the stairs behind Dash and frowned. "Let's just get to class."

With a tense frown, she tried to move past him, but Dash stepped in front of her to stop her. Narrowing his eyes, Dash sharply lashed his tail and gave her a long glare. "You can sleep just fine, Saderia. I can't imagine you having *any* problem sleeping since you seem to have *Dingo* in your dreams to save you."

Saderia shot him a withering glare. "I don't know what you're talking about, but we're *not* discussing Dingo. Now let's *get to class*. The sooner we get there, the sooner we can leave, and maybe I can get some sleep when we get home."

Dash rolled his eyes and scowled at her, his tail flicking tensely back and forth. "You don't have to keep lying, Saderia. I already know you came

here because you didn't want to walk with me." He curled his lip. "Isn't that a little immature?"

Saderia gaped at him in disbelief and started to protest, but didn't get the chance.

With an annoyed scowl, Loki looked up at Dash and sharply flicked her tail, her expression dark with frustration. "Hey, chill out, man. How do you know she's lying? Don't you have trouble sleeping after everything that's happened?"

Dash narrowed his eyes at her with a scowl, but said nothing.

Loki just shook her head and rolled her eyes. "If anyone's immature, Dash, it's you. Now let's get to class before Ms. Spot yells at us for being late. While the rest of us work on some math problems, you can work on getting over yourself instead."

Dash glared at her for a long moment of silence, then looked away with a long, grudging sigh. Reluctantly, he stepped aside to let them pass and fell into step beside Saderia when she stepped forward to lead the way, his tail dragging along the ground.

In silence, the three of them padded up the stairs and stepped past the wide double doors into the atrium of the school. With her friends close beside her, Saderia padded through the small crowd of sleepy students stumbling to class and stepped out into the left hallway. Side by side, the three of them padded down the long hallway to their classroom without saying a single word. Never once did Saderia or Dash speak or even bother to look at each other as they stalked down the hallway next to Loki. Tension seemed to crackle through the air, growing stronger and stronger with each step.

For a long moment, Loki walked along beside them in silence, casting them annoyed looks out of the corner of her eye. After walking down the hallway in silence for what seemed like ages, she finally stopped in the middle of the long corridor with an exaggerated sigh of exasperation. "All right, enough." With a tense frown, she stepped out in front of them to block their way and narrowed her eyes at them when they looked up at her in surprise. "I am not moving and *you* are not moving until you two lighten up. If I have to be late for you two to ease up a bit, then so be it. I'm not going to spend the rest of my days here at school avoiding the storm cloud that is you two."

Saderia flattened her ears and let out an uncomfortable sigh. “Sorry, Loki...but it’s a little too complicated to resolve here in the hallway...”

“I don’t care.” Loki sharply lashed her tail and narrowed her eyes. “You can at least get a start on it.” Seeing Saderia’s tense frown, she just shrugged. “I’m not afraid to be late. Ms. Spot probably won’t even care. You know how she is—she lets me get away with murder.”

Dash snorted and rolled his eyes. “What—you mean like Dingo?” he muttered under his breath.

Saderia whipped around to glare at him. “Shut up about Dingo!”

Gritting his teeth, Dash whipped around to glare at her and tensely lashed his tail. “I’m just saying he’s not as great as you make him out to be, and if *you* didn’t spend all your time over there with him, *we* might be able to be friends again!”

Saderia gaped at him in disbelief. “Who do you think you are? The only reason we’re not friends anymore, Dash, is because *you* are an immature jerk!”

“Oh, *I’m* immature?” Dash lashed his tail and gritted his teeth in frustration. “You’re the one who left early just to avoid me! Don’t try to deny it!”

“Fine, I won’t!” Gritting her teeth, Saderia glared at him with flashing amber eyes. “I did leave early partly to avoid you! Who *wouldn’t* want to avoid you with the way you’re acting?”

“Um, guys...?” Raising her eyebrows, Loki glanced back and forth between them and frowned. “I think you’re missing the point. You’re supposed to be...you know...*making up*.”

Saderia rolled her eyes and looked away with a scowl. “I’ll make up with him when he says he’s sorry.”

“I said I was sorry!” Dash whipped around to stare at her with eyes wide with disbelief. “I said it like fifty times! How many times do I need to say it, Saderia?”

She snorted and avoided his eyes. “You can say it all you want, Dash, but it won’t matter since you don’t mean it.”

“I *do* mean it!” he snapped.

Saderia gritted her teeth and whipped around to glare at him. “Then prove it!”

Dash gaped at her in disbelief. “How?”

She let out a long sigh and looked away with a roll of her eyes, sharply lashing her tail. “I don’t know, Dash. Maybe if you weren’t such a *jerk* all the time, it would mean a little more.”

“Well, *sorry* for being a jerk! Jeez!” Dash shook his head in disbelief and gritted his teeth. “It’s a little hard not to be when everyone everywhere hates me now because of that stupid war!”

Saderia whirled around to glare at him with flashing amber eyes, her paws shaking with anger. “Look, what do you want me to do, Dash? Feel sorry for you after you...” Right before she said it, she bit her tongue and trailed off, catching herself just in time. She couldn’t exactly blurt out the whole ordeal with Dastarius with Loki standing right there. Gritting her teeth, she looked away and let out a grudging sigh. “Never mind. We can’t do this here.”

Dash let out a weary sigh of his own and directed his eyes to the ground, his shoulders slumping with defeat. Tense silence fell over them. After what felt like ages, Dash just shook his head and abruptly turned to stalk away from them. Before Loki could protest, he pushed past her and stalked off down the hallway, muttering a few last words under his breath. “I’m going to class. You two...do whatever you want.”

Saderia stared after him with dark, narrowed eyes, then looked away with a long sigh.

Loki stood frozen in place. Blinking several times, she glanced back in the direction Dash had gone, then turned back to look at Saderia with wide eyes. Slowly, she shook her head. “Okay...that didn’t exactly work out as planned.”

Saderia pressed a paw to her forehead and rolled her eyes. “It’s okay, Loki. I know you were just trying to help...but I don’t think anyone can help us now.” With a sad glimmer in her eyes, she looked past her and nodded to the stretch of hallway behind her. “Let’s just get to class. And... do me a favor, and try to just ignore Dash. I’ll...I’ll deal with our issues back at home.”

Loki frowned, then just nodded with a sad shrug. “Fair enough.” With a reluctant sigh, she rose to her paws and turned to lead the way back down the hallway, her shoulders slumped with defeat. “So long as you do me a favor and try not to stress out so much.”

Saderia just sighed as she fell into step beside her friend and shook her head. "I'll try, Loki. But that's not always as easy as it sounds..."

The rest of the day passed by slowly. Once Saderia reached the classroom to start her day, she found herself pulling away from Dash. While Jeb and the other students filed into the classroom and took their seats, Saderia found herself unconsciously scooting her chair as far away from Dash as possible. Even though she knew it was childish, she just couldn't help it. She didn't want Dash to be able to make her so upset, but he could and he had. All she wanted was to avoid another fight.

Throughout the rest of the school day, Saderia made sure to surround herself with her other friends, Jeb, Loki, and Lisa. When they switched classes and walked across the hallway to their other classroom, Saderia made sure to walk between Loki, Jeb, and Lisa. Everywhere they walked throughout the day, they chatted in light, carefree voices, but Saderia could tell that, like Loki, Jeb had probably already guessed that something was wrong. Thankfully, he found it best not to bring it up during the day. So did Loki. Surrounded by friends and animals who could overhear, all of them found it best to keep their worries to themselves.

At lunch, Saderia led Jeb over to the table to sit with Loki and Lisa, while Dash hovered behind them, watching them with narrowed eyes. Eventually, he walked away from them to sit somewhere else. After taking a seat far away from them at the other end of the table, he spent most of his lunchtime sending bitter, anxious glances in their direction and wishing that Jeb, Loki, and Lisa would just disappear so that *he* could talk to Saderia. But that just made him feel worse. What was it Dastarius had said? *How long until Princess moves on to another friend on 'the good side'? Will you hate him then, too? You've turned your back on the good side...*

Dash struggled to keep Dastarius's icy words out of his head, but no matter how hard he tried not to think of them, they only seemed to repeat in his mind over and over again. As he stumbled listlessly through the rest of the day, he couldn't help but think of them again and again. Each time they flashed through his mind, he only grew more and more resentful of Saderia and her friends. He couldn't kid himself anymore. It was clear that Saderia would never talk to him again—not as long as she had other friends to distract herself with. Their friendship was all but nonexistent. It was a joke

—a ruse—meant to calm the other forest animals and make them believe that everything was back to normal now that the war was over.

Before the war, Dash had overheard students at school talking about Princess Saderia *always* in conjuncture with ‘Dash’ and ‘Loki,’ the Princess’s two best friends. How long before they spoke of Jeb and Loki as Saderia’s two best friends instead? The entire kingdom usually thought of Princess Saderia’s best friend and closest confidant in dealing with world matters as being *Prince Dash*. How long before that changed to Dingo? How long before Dastarius proved himself right and Dash was stuck back in his old clearing in the woods with Saderia and the entire forest turned against him once again?

Anger flared in Dash’s mind at the thought. He could *not* let that happen. No matter what, he could *not* let that *happen!*

The only problem was that he was powerless to stop it.

As he watched Saderia stumble through the day without him, spending time with Jeb, Loki, and Lisa instead—as if he didn’t even exist—he felt his anxiety quickly give way to desperation. He would do anything to stop Dingo and Jeb from stealing his friendship with Saderia and make her his friend again, but he didn’t know what he could do. At that point, he would be willing to die just to get her to like him again. And barring that, he would do just about anything else. *Something* had to happen to bring them together again—something that happened only between her and him.

He was willing to do anything to make that something happen soon.

Bright silver moonlight shone down on the wide clearing outside Saderia’s house, bathing the wild grass in a milky gray glow. Saderia sat just outside the closed door to her house, gazing up at the stars twinkling in the black night sky and blinking against the eerie silver light dappling her fur. Chilly wind whispered through the dense woods all around the clearing, filling the silent air with the sound of rustling leaves. Standing frozen to the spot, Saderia gazed out at the shadowy forest around her without a word, as still as the thick woods and as silent as the night itself.

How long she had been standing there was a mystery to her. It might have been only an hour or so, but she couldn’t be sure. The only thing she was sure of was that she was not going to sleep tonight. The horrifying nightmares that tormented her were becoming too much to handle. Night

had fallen not long ago, but she didn't even want to attempt to sleep. When she knew that the same haunting scenes would fill her mind again the instant she closed her eyes, she never wanted to sleep again. She didn't want to be afraid anymore. If that meant going without sleep...for as long as she could...so be it.

A soft rustling noise suddenly sounded from a patch of woods close beside her, breaking the peaceful silence of the night. Blinking in surprise, Saderia looked up at the noise and almost jumped when she saw a tangled clump of bushes trembling just a few paces away from her on the very edge of the dark woods. Before her eyes, a tiny yellow figure crept out from the dark bushes and stumbled out of the woods, shaking leaves out of his striped fur. With wide blue and green eyes, the tiny creature looked up quickly and froze just a few paces away from her, his gaze flashing with fear. Their eyes locked.

Surprise raced through Saderia, but her fur slowly began to lie flat when she realized she recognized the tiny creature. Blinking several times, she narrowed her eyes and tipped her head to the side with a bewildered frown. "Jeb? What are you doing out here so late?"

At the sound of her voice, Jeb blinked once, his eyes flashing with recognition. For a split second, the tiny creature hesitated on the edge of the forest, then hastily padded toward her. Bristling against the chilly night air, he silently stepped up to her and stopped when he stood right in front of her. He paused, then slowly looked up to meet her confused amber eyes. "I...I came to see you. I snuck out after my parents fell asleep. "I-I wanted to make sure you were okay. You seemed kind of upset at school..."

Saderia blinked once, then looked away with a weary sigh. Narrowing her eyes, she started to say something to shrug off his concerns, then paused when realization suddenly flickered through her mind. With a surprised frown, she whipped back around to look at him and raised an eyebrow, her whiskers twitching with a hint of amusement. "You snuck out, Jeb? That's quite...bold of you."

Jeb flattened his ears in embarrassment and nervously shuffled his paws. "Sorry...I guess I just got used to it after hanging out with you guys."

Saderia chuckled and shook her head with a faint smile. "I guess I can understand that. Just don't tell my dad that."

Jeb managed a smile, then narrowed his eyes with a more curious frown. “Anyway...are you okay, Saderia? I saw you and Dash get into a fight in the hallway...What exactly was that about?” He paused, then nervously flicked his tail. “And why are you out here so late? Shouldn’t you be sleeping?”

Saderia winced and uncomfortably looked away. “I just...couldn’t sleep. Nightmares, you know...”

“Oh...” Jeb winced and looked down with a frown. “I get those, too.”

Saderia paused, then shot him a curious glance out of the corner of her eye. “About the war?”

Jeb nodded with a slight shiver. “Yeah. They’re really scary, too. But I usually get over them when I wake up. After all, they’re not real, right?”

Saderia sighed and wearily looked away, her eyes clouding. “Right.”

Jeb just shrugged, then slowly looked up at Saderia, his blue and green eyes glimmering with curiosity. “So what were you and Dash fighting about? And why are you two always so...tense around each other?”

Saderia shrugged uncomfortably, keeping her eyes locked on the ground. “It’s just...during the war...something happened between us...” With a tense scowl, Saderia trailed off, feeling a strange surge of pain and desperation bubble up inside her. Before she could stop herself, she found herself blurting out the words she had spent so long trying to hide. “Dash...before and during the war...he wasn’t always on our side.”

Jeb blinked in surprise, then frowned in misunderstanding. “What? What do you mean?”

Saderia didn’t want to explain all of it to Jeb, knowing it would only upset him, but before she could try to talk herself out of it, she heard herself whisper, “You know how I can speak to ghosts?”

Jeb shivered involuntarily and looked down with a nervous frown. “Yeah. But what does that have to do with anything? Claw’s the only one you can talk to, and she’s nice, right?”

“Claw’s not the only ghost I can talk to.” Saderia narrowed her eyes and slowly turned to scowl down at the ground, her heart beginning to beat faster against her will. “And as it turns out, I’m not the only one who can talk to ghosts. Remember back when we were in the desert searching for my dad and Claw came and pointed us in the right direction? You couldn’t

see or hear her then, but she told me that some of my ghost-seeing abilities had started to ‘rub off’ on Dash and Dingo—which is why *they* could see her then. Some of my Dream sense somehow transferred to them, so now they both can see ghosts. At the time, I didn’t think that was a bad thing, but...there are some ghosts who should just stay dead...”

Trailing off, she hesitated for a long moment, then closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Before she could try to talk herself out of it, she launched into the story of how Dash had visited Dastarius during the war. After reminding Jeb of who he was, she described how Dastarius had spoken to Dash in dreams both before and during the war. With distant eyes, she described everything Dash had told her about Dastarius and what the dark spirit had told him, then started to retell her memories of the final battle when Dastarius had appeared atop Rock’s monstrous den and commanded Dash to kill her while she had been dangling from the ledge.

With every word, Jeb’s multicolored eyes grew wider and wider and his fur bristled more and more with shock. When she finally finished, he gaped at her in disbelief, as if hardly knowing what to think. “Dash...He really did all *that*? ”

Saderia nodded with a grim, faraway look in her eyes. “That’s what we were fighting about in the hallway. That’s also why we’re always so tense. Dash has been a good friend for a long time...but it’s a little hard to trust him after all that’s happened.”

Jeb blinked several times, then slowly looked down at his paws, his eyes wide with shock. His tail flicked wildly back and forth with distress as everything she had said slowly sunk in. “I...I didn’t know any of that,” he stammered. “I didn’t know all of that stuff was going on during the war...” He trailed off and shook his head in disbelief, his eyes distant with shock. “Wow. I would have never thought there was all this stuff going on...in the background.”

“That’s the way we like to keep it.” Saderia narrowed her eyes with a tense frown and sharply looked up at Jeb, her face suddenly dark with seriousness. “Speaking of which, please don’t mention this to anyone, Jeb. Especially not Dash. Dingo knows, but no one else does. Not even my parents.”

“Wow...” Jeb stared down at the ground with wide blue and green eyes, seeming lost as he tried to make sense of everything. “I...I won’t tell

anyone, Saderia.” He paused, then looked up with wide eyes, his fur rising up in shock. “I never would have thought that Dash would do anything like that. That’s...that’s *really* bad!”

“He was tricked into it...I guess.” Saderia let out a long sigh and wearily looked away. “You’ve never met Dastarius, Jeb, so you don’t know how tricky he is. He tricked even me at one point, so some part of me can’t completely blame Dash for falling for his lies. But at the same time, I do blame him. Unlike me, he knew for a fact that Dastarius was nothing but trouble from the start...and yet he listened to him anyway.”

“That’s not right.” Jeb narrowed his eyes and slowly shook his head, his gaze clouded with distress. “I can’t believe that...” He paused, then looked up with a tense frown. “You don’t think he’ll...do that again, do you?”

Saderia sighed and gazed absently back at her home. “I hope not, Jeb, but...I don’t know anymore. I just don’t know. I wish I did.”

Jeb frowned and looked up at her curiously, his blue and green eyes narrowed with sympathy. He hesitated for a long moment of silence, then slowly stepped forward and placed his small paw over hers. His eyes shimmered with dismay. “I’m really sorry, Saderia. I didn’t know things got so bad between you and Dash.” He paused, then nervously flicked his tail. “Do you think it will get better soon?”

Saderia shrugged helplessly. “It hasn’t gotten better in weeks now, so I don’t know. I wish Dash and I could be friends again, but it doesn’t seem like things are ever going to be right between us...”

Jeb looked down with dark bicolor eyes and nodded sadly. With a tense, uncertain frown, he hesitated for a moment, seeming lost in thought. After a tense beat of silence, he suddenly looked up with wide, hopeful eyes. “Maybe...maybe we should all do something together.” When Saderia looked back at him in surprise, he managed a faint smile. “Don’t you remember when we all went on our first journey together—you, me, Dash, and Dingo? That seemed to bring us all closer together, so maybe if we all get together again, things will be better.”

Saderia’s eyes grew dull with sadness and longing as she pictured the reunion Jeb had described. For a moment, she actually let herself believe that it might work. Just as soon as hope flitted through her mind, though, she forcefully shook her head and looked down as reality crashed

down on her. “Sorry, Jeb, but I don’t think that will work again. Letting Dash and Dingo get anywhere near each other is just a bad idea right now.”

Jeb blinked in surprise and tipped his head to the side. “Why?”

“Evidently, they hate each other now.” Saderia rolled her eyes and just barely suppressed a sigh. “I don’t know why, but they do.”

Jeb’s eyes widened in dismay. “What? Why? Why does everyone hate each other all of a sudden?”

“I don’t know.” Saderia lowered her eyes to the ground and let out a quiet breath, her shoulders slumping with defeat. “As for your idea...I guess we could try it, but...”

Before she could finish her thought, a sharp rustling sound suddenly sliced through the silence around the clearing. Blinking in shock, Saderia snapped her head up to face the source of the sound, while Jeb whipped around with a frightened squeak. The instant she looked up, a spotted yellow figure shot out from a thick clump of bushes close by the dirt path leading out of the clearing. In a wild, blurred streak of yellow, the figure raced toward Saderia at blinding speeds. Before she could even realize what was happening, a bristling cheetah skidded to a halt just in front of her, nearly stumbling over her own paws. Panic shimmered in her wide green eyes and her spotted sides heaved with exhausted pants.

“Saderia!” she choked out, her voice strangled as she gasped for air.

Saderia’s eyes widened in shock. “Loki? What are you doing here?”

Loki gazed up at her and Jeb with wide, terrified green eyes, her sides heaving with exhaustion and her breath coming out in short, desperate gasps. “H-Have you seen Tawny around here recently?”

Saderia blinked in surprise, her eyes round with bewilderment. “Tawny? No, I haven’t seen her. Have you, Jeb?” When Jeb shook his head in confusion, Saderia just shrugged and looked back at Loki with a frown. “Neither of us have seen her. Why? What’s going on?”

Loki let out a long sigh and looked down, her shoulders slumping with disappointment and her eyes clouding with fear. “She went missing. Maeta can’t find her anywhere, and neither can any of the leopards. Maeta told me to run here to see if you had seen her because right before she went missing, we heard her saying something about how she ‘wanted to have an adventure just like Princess Saderia.’”

Saderia's eyes widened in shock and her heart skipped a beat. "That's horrible! I...I could search around here a little bit, but I think I would have seen her if she were here. Do you have any other idea of where she could be?"

Loki bit her lip and fearfully shook her head. "No, I have no idea. For all I know, she could have gone to the desert to see Bunny!"

Saderia's breath caught in her throat and her paws instantly tensed with fear. "The *desert*? If she went there, she could be in danger! Rock's old followers are everywhere out there at night!"

Loki's eyes widened in alarm. With wildly bristling fur, she opened her mouth to respond, but never got the chance. Another loud rustling and crunching sound suddenly rang out from the undergrowth at the very front of the clearing, cutting the cheetah off.

Ignoring the stunned gasps of her friends, Saderia instantly whipped around to face the source of the sound and felt her heart skip with disbelief. In a flash, four shaggy canines burst out from behind the dark, shadowy bushes rising up on the outskirts of the clearing. With weeds and leaves tangled around their legs, all four of them stumbled across the clearing in Saderia's direction, their sides heaving and their mouths hanging open in harsh, shaky gasps. A lanky brown dog stumbled out ahead of the other three, leaving a skinny red dingo, a slender yellow dog, and their chubbier orange companion staggering clumsily after him. Just as he stumbled to a stop in front of Saderia and her friends, the shaggy brown dog at the front of the crowd looked up, his light brown eyes shimmering with panic and desperation.

Saderia's eyes widened in shock. "Dingo? ...Rip? Tear? Lightning?"

Dingo let out a long, weary breath just as he stumbled to a halt in front of her, shaking vines and leaves from his fur. Taking a shaky breath, he looked up at Saderia with wide eyes, struggling to speak through his panting. "Have...Have you seen Bunny?"

Saderia blinked in surprise and opened her mouth to respond, but didn't get the chance to ask what he was talking about.

Without warning, a low, deadly growl rumbled through the silent clearing behind Saderia. With wide eyes, she and the others whipped around just in time to see Dash stalk out from the open doorway of his house, his fur sticking out in clumps and his dark brown mane even messier than

normal. Narrowing his eyes, the dark lion glared at Dingo and bared his fangs in a furious snarl, not seeming to notice anyone else. Anger burned in his voice. “What are *you* doing here?”

Dingo shot Dash a furious glare and sharply lashed his tail. “Shut up, Dash, I don’t have time for you!”

Dash gaped at him in disbelief and opened his mouth to snap back at him, but Saderia cut him off before he could.

“Dingo, what do you mean?” Before Dash could start another fight, Saderia whipped back around to face Dingo with wide, bewildered amber eyes, her heart beating faster in her chest. “Is Bunny missing, too?”

Dingo opened his mouth to reply, then frowned and tipped his head to the side in confusion. “‘Too’?”

Loki narrowed her eyes and gave him a grim frown. “Tawny’s missing, as well.”

Dingo’s ears pricked up and his eyes grew wide. “They’ve got to be together then. Listen,” he added, whirling around to look at Saderia. “Before Bunny went missing, Lightning said he heard her murmuring about going to find Tawny for some reason. That’s why we came here. She’s got to be somewhere here in the forest, and Tawny’s got to be with her.”

“We can all look together then,” Saderia said quickly, her heart beating faster and her eyes growing darker with determination. “Loki, take Rip, Tear, and Lightning and run back to the Home of the Leopards to tell the others what’s happened and help them look around the neighborhood for Tawny and Bunny. Dingo, Jeb, Dash, and I will look around here and try to find them.”

“Got it.” With a hasty nod, Loki whipped around and darted toward the dirt path leading out of the clearing, signaling for Rip, Tear, and Lightning to follow. Instantly, the three canines whipped around to race after her, leaving Dingo standing alone in the clearing with Saderia, Dash, and Jeb.

Saderia’s eyes flashed. Ignoring the tension crackling between Dash and Dingo, she gazed around at her three friends and narrowed her eyes, her heart beating faster with determination. “Let’s go! We’ve got two cubs to find, and we need to find them now!”

Chapter Thirteen

Rivalry

Saderia raced through the dense woods as fast as she could, her tail streaming wildly out behind her. Gasping for breath, she stumbled past thick clumps of dark, moonlit bushes and towering trees, scanning the land around her for any sign of the missing animals. Dash, Dingo, and Jeb raced after her as fast as they could, their panting breaths breaking through the thick silence of the night. Bitter growls sounded behind her and tension crackled through the air, but Saderia tried to ignore the discomfort hanging over Dash and Dingo behind her. Stumbling through a thick patch of undergrowth, she skidded to a halt in the middle of the dense, shadowy woods and nearly tripped over her own paws. Wildly, she scanned the thick bushes and trees all around her, but saw nothing. Her heart sank.

Heaving a weary sigh, Saderia desperately turned around in a circle, studying the miles of dense forest spreading out on all sides of her and struggling to figure out which direction might lead her to Tawny and Bunny. Loki, Rip, Tear, and Lightning would be searching far away on the other side of the forest, closer to the Home of the Leopards. Karenisha, Makero, Cia, and Uncle Jash, who had joined the search after Saderia had rushed in to tell them what was happening, would be searching the woods on the opposite side of the clearing outside their house, far away from them. The entire woodsy area surrounding Saderia was unsearched ground. The two young animals could be anywhere around her.

Her heart thumped with panic at the thought. Only about an hour or so seemed to have passed since they had started looking, but Saderia was already beginning to lose hope. After all, the forest was a huge place and two tiny animals could be anywhere in it. The constant hostility and low snarling emanating from Dash and Dingo didn't help the situation either...

Struggling to fight back her fear, Saderia took a deep breath and closed her eyes, hoping to tap into her instinct. If she could just calm down and let her Dream sense take over, her instinct might be able to point her in

the direction the two young animals had gone. Taking a deep breath, she let it out and slowly began to relax. Just as a familiar, otherworldly sense began to tingle in the back of her mind, though, a low growl broke out behind her, slicing through the peaceful silence and chasing her instinct away before it could take shape.

“Why are we stopping?” With a low snarl, Dash stepped forward and glared out at the dark forest around them, his tail lashing tensely back and forth. “Which way should we go?”

Before Saderia could reply, Dingo stepped up beside her and cut her off with a cool, exasperated growl. “Don’t be so impatient. That’s what she’s trying to figure out.”

Saderia narrowed her eyes with an annoyed scowl when a low growl rumbled behind her.

“Maybe you should use your instinct,” Dash hissed to her, shooting her a cool, almost condescending glance through narrowed eyes. “*That* might help.”

“Maybe she could actually try that if you would shut your mouth and quit talking,” Dingo snapped back, giving him a burning glare.

Saderia’s ears drooped and her eyes narrowed. With an exasperated scowl, she fought the urge to punch herself in the face and the even greater urge to punch her friends.

Behind her, Jeb cautiously stepped after them and eyed them with nervous blue and green eyes. “Uh...guys?”

Letting out a long, calming breath, Saderia slowly turned around to face her friends, her eyes flashing in the darkness. “All of you hush. I’m trying to concentrate.”

While Dash sent Dingo a withering glare that Dingo just snorted at and Jeb glanced nervously between the two of them, Saderia simply heaved a sigh and turned back around to gaze out at the shadowy woods surrounding her. Slowly, she closed her eyes and tried to relax, pushing away her annoyance in favor of calmness. Without a sound, she cast her instinct out beyond herself and searched the forest with her Dream sense, scanning for any sign of the lost animals. After a long, tense moment of silence, a soft, sly tug suddenly pulled at her from one certain direction. Her eyes flew open. Knowing instantly what the feeling meant, she whipped

around to face the direction her instinct had pulled her toward, her heart skipping a beat.

She didn't waste a second. With a soft gasp, she whipped around and charged off into the shadowy forest as fast as she could, tearing straight through a clump of undergrowth and throwing a cluster of leaves up into the air without noticing. Behind her, her friends instantly turned to race after her, letting out stunned yelps that echoed through the silent air.

"Saderia, slow down!" With a gasp, Jeb stumbled after her alongside Dash and Dingo, struggling to keep up.

Saderia barely heard him. Leaping over a moldy log in her path, she wove through the thick spattering of trees, leading the way through the forest and never looking back. Desperate cries rang out behind her.

"Saderia!" Dash let out a frantic gasp and struggled to catch up with her, his voice tinged with panic. "Wait up!"

Saderia ignored him. Following the pull of her intuition, she charged through the woods as fast as she could, never daring to slow down until she had all but lost sight of her friends. Ignoring their panicked cries and shouts, she wove through the trees at a nearly blinding pace, her paws slamming roughly against the ground. Leaves and twigs crackled beneath her frantic paws, but she barely heard the sharp sounds. As fast as she could, she wove in and out of the trees like a fluid wave and dashed through the dark, shadowy bushes as though they were nothing, snapping branches in half and sending leaves fluttering through the air. Ducking under low-hanging branches, she raced deeper into the shadowy forest—deeper than she had ever gone before. Shadows leered out at her and low branches smacked at her face and sides with every step, but she ignored it all and kept moving.

Practically tripping over her own paws, she tore through the forest as fast as she could. With every step she took deeper into the woods, though, she found herself gradually slowing down, unable to keep up her fast pace. When she pulled herself out of her daze and raised her head to look around as she ran, her heart almost skipped a beat.

Deep inside the shadowy woods, the trees grew so close together she could barely move. With every step she took deeper into the forest, they only grew thicker and closer together. Billions of trees scattered the land all around her, packed so tightly together she could barely breathe. In between every tree, an enormous cluster of thick, tangled bushes and undergrowth

bloomed up in the shadows, towering over the wild, overgrown grass. With barely any space between them, the tall, shadowy trees towered far above her head, creating a dark canopy of leaves so thick it completely blocked out the sky. Not a single gap broke through the shadowy canopy.

No light at all shone down into the woods, leaving nothing but pitch black shadows all around her. Everything was dark. The air itself was a dark gray so close to black it made it almost impossible to see a few feet in front of her. Every tree and bush she passed was pitch black against the darkness. As she stumbled around the thickly packed trees and undergrowth, the landscape only seemed to grow creepier. Slowly, the trees she passed grew more gnarled and twisted, malformed and practically intertwined with each other. Hundreds upon hundreds of dead, skeletal trees rose up from the wild grass around her until they outnumbered the living, as if they too had been given no room to breathe. And yet even with all the dead, leafless branches, the canopy above remained as thick as ever—so thick that not a hint of sunshine or moonlight could pierce through the darkness.

An eerie shiver raced down her spine. As the trees grew thicker and thicker, the entire woods seemed to grow darker and creepier. Even with her wild crashing through the woods, it seemed as silent as a crypt. The hundreds of gnarled, interlocking trees and branches spreading across the forest all around her seemed to grow thicker and thicker with no end in sight, leaving the woods covered in shadows. For some reason, it almost seemed as if the dead trees themselves were trying to hide something.

With a shaky gasp, Saderia skidded to a halt in between five towering trees spaced far enough apart that they left just enough room for her and a few animals about her size to stand comfortably. In this dark forest, it could probably count as a clearing. Taking in deep, gasping breaths, she spun around in a circle, studying the dense woods around her. Panting heavily, she closed her eyes, reaching into her instinct to figure out which way to go next. When she tried to discover which direction would lead to Tawny and Bunny, though, her Dream sense was suddenly gone. A small tingle in her paws told her that she was in the right place, but the pull that had led her there and shown her where to go had vanished. Her mind was blank. Only a small, creepy feeling nagged at the back of her mind, sending a shiver down her spine.

Her eyes fluttered open and a soft hiss breathed out of Saderia's throat. "My instinct is so annoying sometimes... Why does it have to be so unpredictable?"

Her annoyed muttering was abruptly cut off by a wild shout from behind her.

"Saderia!" Dingo's panicked voice rang through the darkness. "Where are you?"

Saderia flattened her ears and heaved a long sigh. "I'm over here!" she called, glancing half-heartedly over her shoulder.

With a wild crashing sound and the crackle of snapping undergrowth, Dash, Dingo, and Jeb clumsily staggered out through a copse of trees and bushes right behind her and stumbled out into the clearing. Gasping for breath, Dash staggered to a stop just behind her with Dingo and Jeb close behind him. Struggling for air, all three of them looked up to gaze out at the tiny clearing around them with narrowed eyes, their faces dark with unease.

While her friends caught their breath, Saderia let out a quiet sigh and spun around to examine the dark woods. Panic fluttered in her chest when she realized every pitch black tree and bush around her looked exactly the same. There was virtually no way to tell which direction to take. Her heart skipped, but she struggled to push back her fear. Silently cursing her instinct, she hoped with all of her heart that by the time she actually found the two young animals, her instinct would kick in again and show her how to get home. The last thing she wanted was to be stuck in a woods as unsettling and confusing as this one.

Behind her, Dash looked up with narrowed eyes and scowled at her. "Why'd you have to run so fast? We could've gotten lost!"

"Oh, quit complaining," Dingo snapped with a roll of his eyes. "We made it here, didn't we?" While Dingo muttered under his breath, Saderia glanced back over her shoulder just in time to see him lean down to inspect his shaggy brown legs. Wincing, he tugged at a thick tangle of thorns and weeds that had wrapped themselves around all four of his legs and forcefully kicked them away. With a twinge of guilt, Saderia realized he must have gotten stuck in the dense undergrowth while running after her since he was still so unaccustomed to the forest.

Shaking off her guilt, Saderia looked back at her two friends and flattened her ears. “Would you two stop fighting? We’ve got a situation here.”

While Dash just scowled and sent glares in Dingo’s direction, Dingo just rolled his eyes and sighed. “Sorry. What’s wrong now?”

Letting out a soft sigh, Saderia gazed back at the dark woods and shook her head. “Well, I know Tawny and Bunny are around here somewhere. The only problem is that I don’t know exactly where.”

Dingo blinked in surprise, then turned to look around at the dark woods with a groan. “So they could be anywhere in this weird place?”

Saderia nodded with a weary sigh. “Yep. I guess the only thing we can do now is pick a direction...” When Dingo winced, she opened her mouth to say more, but didn’t get a chance.

Before she could speak, Jeb suddenly looked up at her with wide blue and green eyes, his face lighting up with hope. “Hey, wait a minute! Why don’t you call the ghost dingo? Maybe she can see where they are. Doesn’t she usually help you with these kinds of things?”

Saderia blinked in surprise and tipped her head to the side. “Claw?” When Jeb nodded, she frowned, wondering why she hadn’t thought of that herself. Shaking it off, she gazed thoughtfully up at the sky and merely flicked her tail. “I don’t think I’ve ever actually *called* her to the living world...but it’s worth a try, I guess.”

Beside her, Dash snorted and rolled his eyes. “This’ll be a waste of time.”

Dingo whipped around to glare at him and bared his fangs in a snarl. “Do you have something to say?”

Dash just rolled his eyes and ignored him.

“Dash! Dingo!” Saderia shot them a burning glare and gritted her teeth, her tail lashing with annoyance. “Cool off for one second! Jeez!” Shaking her head in exasperation, she took a deep breath and raised her head to the sky, trying to focus. For a tense moment of silence, she hesitated, unsure of what to do, then took a deep breath and raised her voice to a loud, hopeful shout. “Claw? Um...if you can hear me, I...could really use your help right now!”

Biting her lip, Saderia hesitated for a second to see if she would respond and frowned when not a sound whispered through the darkness.

After a long moment of silence, she awkwardly flicked her tail and gazed around at the dark woods. “Um...we’re trying to find these two missing animals, and they could be in a lot of trouble! I’m sure you can see where they’re at! Could you please come and maybe tell us which direction to go in so that we can find them?”

The forest was silent.

Saderia’s ears drooped and her heart thumped with disappointment. “Not even a whisper...” With a tense frown, she gazed out at the dark woods and narrowed her eyes in an uneasy scowl. Not even the slightest turn of the wind whispered through the shadowy woods.

“That’s not good.” With a grim frown and tense, narrowed eyes, Dingo slowly stepped up beside her to gaze out at the woods, a grave shadow on his face. “It isn’t like Claw to ignore something like that. I wonder if something’s going on...where she’s at.”

Dash rolled his eyes with an almost condescending growl. “Relax. It’s the spirit realm, Dingo. It’s not like she can die again.”

With flashing brown eyes, Dingo whipped around to face him and bared his fangs in a snarl. “If you’re so sure, maybe I should send *you* there to check it out then!”

Dash glared back at him and curled his lip in disgust. “Go ahead. It’s not like that would be anything new for you.”

“You—”

“Guys!” With a furious lash of her tail, Saderia glared at both of them, her eyes flaming with annoyance. “Seriously! This is getting *really* annoying!”

While she glared at her two feuding friends, Jeb cast a quick, nervous glance at the two of them and discreetly took a step back, trying to stay out of the line of fire.

Saderia glared at them for a moment longer, then slowly made herself turn away. With a soft sigh, she sat back and curled her tail over her paws as calmly as possible, trying to hide her annoyance. “I’m sure whatever’s stopping Claw from coming here can’t be too dangerous. She probably just has some things she’s looking into and doesn’t even know we’re calling her.” As she spoke, she vaguely remembered her last visit and Claw’s mention of the ‘errands’ she needed to run. “Either way, there’s nothing we can do to help her from here, so we should focus on our current

predicament. Speaking of which, the only thing we can do now is pick a direction and see what we find.” She paused, then cast a glance back at her friends. “Does anybody have any ideas?”

Silence hung over her three friends. Slowly, all of them turned to gaze out at the shadowy woods, narrowing their eyes to examine the trees and thinking about it. Seeming lost in thought, Dingo absently rose to his paws and turned to pace around the right side of the tiny clearing, studying the edges of the woods with narrowed, wondering eyes. Not wanting to be outdone, Dash narrowed his eyes and hastily stumbled to his paws. With a tense frown, he turned to pad around the left side of the clearing, examining the ground and the trees beside him. Without a sound, Saderia and Jeb watched them examine the woods, then turned when Dingo suddenly pricked up his ears in interest.

“Over here!” With a quick flick of his tail, Dingo nodded to a tall oak tree towering just beside him on the right edge of the clearing, his eyes shining with hope. “I think they went this way.”

From the left side of the clearing, Dash whipped around to face him with narrowed eyes and a dark scowl. “What makes you say that?”

“This,” Dingo replied, pointing at the tree.

Dash raised an eyebrow. “It’s a tree, Dingo. There are lots of trees around here.”

Dingo rolled his eyes. “I didn’t mean the actual tree, you halfwit. Look.” With a flick of his tail, he stepped away from the tree and gestured to the bottom of it. A long, messy scar ran across the very base of the dark tree, exposing the lighter bark beneath its hard shell. Before Dash could make another scornful remark, Dingo looked up at Saderia and Jeb with determined brown eyes. “Look at how small this mark is and how far down the tree it is. Bunny must have made it when she went through here to mark her path so she wouldn’t get lost. If we go this way, we’re sure to find her.”

Saderia’s eyes lit up with hope, but before she could commend Dingo for his find, Dash let out a low, bitter growl.

“What about this?” Tearing his narrowed eyes off Dingo, he looked up at Saderia and Jeb and gestured to the ground with a flick of his tail. “There’s a paw print.”

Dingo examined the ground with a disinterested scowl and flattened his ears. “There is no paw print, Dash.”

“Yes, there is!” With a fierce snarl, Dash shot him a glare and gritted his teeth. “Look!” With a sharp flick of his tail, he gestured to a tiny, almost unnoticeable patch of dirt shrouded by thick grass right beside him. Pressed into the dirt was an extremely light, almost invisible paw print that seemed much, much tinier than theirs. After studying it for a moment, Saderia realized it was pointing in their direction.

A thoughtful frown crossed her face. “Maybe Tawny and Bunny weren’t together the whole time. Maybe the mark Dingo found was made by Bunny, while that paw print was made by Tawny. But if that’s from Tawny...” She narrowed her eyes in a wondering scowl. “Which way do you think she went? The paw print’s pointing right at us...”

Dash glanced back at the tiny print and frowned. “Maybe she went the opposite direction off into the woods, but just...I don’t know...turned back to look at something, left the print there, then turned around and walked off into the woods in the direction she had been going...”

Saderia blinked in surprise, then shrugged. “I suppose it’s possible.”

“Yes, but she could have turned around, left the print there, and then gone in any direction,” Dingo replied, giving Dash a cool glare and keeping his tone as calm as possible. “She might have realized she was lost and then stumbled off in some random direction to try to find her way back.” He flicked his tail toward the mark on the tree. “This is clearer. With this mark, it’s almost certain that Bunny went this way. Bunny was smart enough to mark her path, so she probably wouldn’t panic about getting lost and end up wandering around in a bunch of confusing directions to try to find her way back, the way Tawny probably did. I think we should try to find Bunny first, since she seems closer and easier to find. Then we can look for Tawny. Once we find Bunny, she might even know where Tawny is, actually.”

Dash flattened his ears and shot him a withering glare. “You don’t know that for sure. And Bunny’s not smarter than Tawny.” He curled his lip. “I mean, she *is* a dingo, after all.”

Dingo glared at him. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Dash just shook his head and rolled his eyes. “Never mind, Dingo. Anyway, I think we should go this way.” With a dark scowl, he gestured in the direction opposite the direction the tiny paw print was facing. “Since Bunny’s so *smart*, she’ll probably be fine on her own for a while. Tawny, on

the other hand, gets scared more easily. Wouldn't it be better to find her before she gets even more lost?"

Before Saderia could speak up and give her own thoughts on the matter, Dingo flattened his ears and gave Dash a dark scowl. "No. If we go after Tawny—who's probably way more lost than Bunny—then we'll just get farther away from Bunny and then we'll never find either of them. It's better to find the one that's closer first and make sure she's safe before we go looking for the one that's farther away."

"And just leave Tawny to wander this place alone for hours?" Dash flattened his ears and lashed his tail tensely across the grass. "We're going this way, Dingo."

"And what gives you the authority to say?" Dingo snapped back, his tail lashing furiously back and forth.

Saderia narrowed her eyes and shot them both a warning glare, her tail twitching with unease. "Guys..." She started to say more, but never got the chance.

With a low snarl, Dash bristled and curled his lip at Dingo. "I rule this forest. How about that? Now stop trying to start a fight!"

"*I'm* trying to start a fight?" Dingo gaped at him in disbelief, then just scowled and rolled his eyes, his lip curling up in a scornful frown. "You 'rule the forest'...Give me a break! You don't rule anything, you nitwit. The royal family just takes pity on you and lets you think you're the Prince!"

Dash gaped at him, then gritted his teeth in a furious snarl. "How dare you? You're the one we all humor, Dingo! You prance around acting like this wonderful Leader when you only became one because Thunder felt sorry for you!"

Dingo flattened his ears and bared his fangs in a dangerous growl. "You don't know anything! Thunder didn't make me Leader! They all did! And they didn't do it because they felt *sorry* for me!"

"Oh, yeah, right!" Dash snorted and rolled his eyes, his fur prickling with annoyance. "That's the only way it *could* have happened, considering you're probably the *worst* Leader in history! If you had tried to take over the forest that way, you would've been laughed out of the woods!"

"What—you mean the way *Rock* took over the forest?" Dingo curled his lip and lashed his tail furiously back and forth, his fur bristling

wildly with anger. “You know...that guy I had to save you, Saderia, *and* your pathetic forest from?”

“Don’t flatter yourself!” Dash spat back. “*I* saved the forest from Rock!”

“Don’t make me laugh!” Dingo snorted and curled his lip in a leering scowl. “The only thing you did was sit back and laugh it up with your stupid father while the forest and the desert were destroyed right before your eyes! You were probably chuckling to yourself when Rock *made* you rip me apart—and probably Karenisha, too!”

Dash gaped at him in horror and let out a furious snarl, his claws driving deep into the grass and his paws shaking wildly with rage. “Don’t you *ever* talk about that! You have no *idea* what I went through!”

“Oh, boo hoo, poor you!” Dingo taunted, rolling his eyes and giving Dash a cold, scathing sneer. “Let’s all feel sorry for you for trying to *kill us!*”

“Well, why not?” Dash curled his lip and lashed his tail wildly back and forth, practically spitting with rage. “It certainly worked for you, Dingo! You’ve got the whole pack and even your stupid dead sister thinking you’re some hero when you’re no different from the one who killed her!”

Dingo let out a furious snarl that seemed to echo around the entire forest. “Don’t you ever talk about my sister!” With eyes burning with rage, he took a step toward Dash and bared his fangs in a growl, his paws shaking with anger and his voice dripping with hatred. “If you say *one* more word about her...” He trailed off with a dangerous growl, his claws shaking against the grass and his eyes blazing with rage.

Dash stalked toward him with a challenging glare, his eyes flashing with hatred. “Claw,” he shouted, “is an idiot!”

Silence.

For a long, tense moment of pure, unbroken silence, Dingo glared at Dash while Dash glared back, their claws digging deeper into the ground and their fangs bared. Dingo’s paws shook with rage and a wild, burning fire seemed to dance in his narrowed brown eyes. With wide eyes, Saderia and Jeb stared at the two of them in shock, hardly daring to breathe. Saderia made a move to stop them, but never got the chance.

Before she could even lift a paw, Dingo took a step forward. With blazing brown eyes and trembling paws, he ground his teeth together and let

out a low, almost inaudible growl. Never tearing his eyes off Dash, he whispered out the words in a low, cold hiss that shivered through the forest. “I hope she spits in your face when you get to the spirit world. Because I’m about to send you there!”

With a thunderous howl, Dingo sprang toward Dash as fast as he could, his claws outstretched and his fangs bared in a bellowing growl. In the same instant, Dash let out a furious snarl and leapt toward him, his eyes flashing with hatred.

Saderia’s eyes widened in shock. “Dash! Dingo!”

Before the words even left her mouth, the two animals clashed in midair with a wild crash and a barrage of furious snarls. Howling and hissing at the tops of their lungs, Dingo and Dash tumbled through the air and slammed down onto the grass with a harsh thud. At once, they rolled across the grassy ground, their claws locked in each other’s shoulders and their eyes blazing with fury. As fast as they could, they tumbled across the forest floor, snapping and clawing at each other’s faces and fighting to pin the other. The pitch black woods seemed to come alive with the bellowing howls and shouts that boomed out from the snarling mess of fur and claws. Saderia’s heart almost stopped when she smelled blood.

“Guys!” With a desperate cry, she stumbled toward them and froze when she saw blood splatter the ground.

They ignored her. With a furious snarl, Dash threw Dingo to the ground with a harsh smack. Ignoring the canine’s wild howl of pain, Dash shoved him hard against the grass, his claws practically shaking in Dingo’s shoulders as blood spilled out onto the ground. Gritting his teeth, Dingo kicked his back legs up into Dash’s stomach with all his strength, knocking the breath from the lion’s throat in a sharp, stunned gasp. With a wild howl of fury, Dingo shoved him away from him, sending Dash stumbling backward with a strangled yelp of surprise.

Dripping blood from his stomach, Dash flew backward and smacked up against the side of a close tree. With a harsh crack, his head snapped back and smacked the tree, making his vision blur. The instant he slumped to the ground with a muted cry of pain, Dingo leapt to his paws and lunged toward him. Right before Dingo smacked into him, Dash forced himself to his paws and whipped around to face him. With a wild crash and a chorus of furious snarls, Dingo plowed into Dash, sending him flying back to the

ground. In the same instant, Dash and Dingo drove their claws deep into each other's shoulders, spilling blood down their legs. Screaming and hissing at the tops of their lungs, they tumbled across the grassy ground, fighting to get the upper hand.

"Guys, knock it off!" Screaming to be heard over their furious snarls, Saderia raced toward them and skidded to a stop just in front of them, her fur bristling and her eyes narrowing in a wild flare of anger. Feeling her heart beat faster, she gritted her teeth in fury. "Stop it! This is ridiculous!"

Neither of them seemed to hear her. In a flash, Dash kicked Dingo away from him, sending the canine stumbling back with a quick yelp of surprise. As fast as he could, Dash rolled around and leapt to his paws, ignoring the blood streaking down his shoulders. Before Dingo could recover, he whipped his claws across his face, making him flinch and sending him staggering backward with a muted cry.

Gritting his teeth, Dingo forced himself to a stop, his eyes flashing with fury through the blood dripping down his face. Before Dash could react, the canine lunged toward him with a wild howl of fury. In a flash, he drove his fangs deep into his shoulder, just barely missing his neck. Biting back a screech of pain, Dash shoved him away with a quick flash of his claws, opening up scars across his chest. Gasping for breath, both of them staggered away from each other, their sides heaving and their fangs bared in two low, enraged snarls.

"What is wrong with you?!" Saderia yelled, her voice rising to a shrill, furious scream. When they only turned to leap at each other again, she gritted her teeth and lashed her tail furiously across the grass, her paws shaking with frustration. "You're acting like *idiots!*"

While Saderia glared and Dash and Dingo raced toward each other to strike again with low, furious snarls, Jeb just stared at them with wide, horrified eyes, practically frozen to the spot. Neither Dash nor Dingo noticed either of them.

In a flash, Dingo dodged a quick swipe of Dash's claws, then shot toward him and slammed him up against the side of a towering tree. Wincing, Dash let out a cry when Dingo pushed him back into the bark, then shoved the canine away with a rough flash of his claws across his belly. The instant Dingo stumbled backward, Dash lunged forward with

flashing eyes and drove his fangs deep into his neck. Gritting his teeth, Dingo wrenched himself away from him and stumbled back a pace, while Dash staggered to the ground.

Before the lion could catch himself, Dingo lunged forward with a furious growl and tore his claws across Dash's face, his eyes practically on fire with anger. With a sharp yelp of pain, Dash staggered backward, gritting his teeth through the stream of blood. Baring his fangs, he let out a harsh growl and started to leap toward Dingo. At the same time, Dingo lunged toward him. Their claws clashed together with a rough smack for a single second before they shoved each other away. Growling furiously, they stumbled backward before catching themselves, their eyes gleaming with rage.

"We have a *situation!*" Saderia snarled, her eyes blazing with fury. Her tail lashed wildly back and forth and her heart burned with exasperation. "We have to find Tawny and Bunny, and all you two *idiots* can do is fight! Knock it off before I knock your heads off!"

They ignored her. While the two snarling animals leapt at each other again, Saderia gritted her teeth, feeling a furious snarl rumble deep in her throat. Practically shaking with anger, she glared at them with all the fire she could muster and started to shout at them again, then broke off with a long sigh. Flattening her ears, she shot them a long glare, then reluctantly tore her eyes off them, her shoulders slumping with defeat.

"Forget this..." Rolling her eyes, she glared down at her paws and stalked away from her two fighting friends with a scowl. "I've got a cub and a pup to find. If these *morons* want to fight all day, *fine*." Sharply lashing her tail, she turned to stalk toward the tree where Bunny had marked the bark, her eyes still burning with anger. In a terse growl, she tossed a few quick words over her shoulder without bothering to look back. "Come on, Jeb! We're leaving!"

Jeb blinked and whipped around to stare at her in shock. For a tense moment, he hesitated, then hastily stumbled to his paws and chased after her, his eyes round with disbelief. Falling into step beside her, he cast a quick glance over his shoulder at the two snarling animals and winced. "What about...them...?"

Saderia snorted and shot them a withering glare out of the corner of her eye. "Just leave them there. If they end up killing each other...oh well.

No big loss, I suppose. Stupid boys," she added under her breath. Giving the battling animals one last glare that they didn't notice, she whipped around with an annoyed hiss and stalked off into the forest.

After a nervous hesitation, Jeb hastily darted after her, not wanting to be left behind. With bewildered blue and green eyes, he stared up at Saderia in surprise and opened his mouth to say something, then seemed to think better of it when he caught the stony look on her face. Wincing, he looked down at his paws with a nervous frown and followed her in silence, trying to hide from her fiery gaze. As the two of them slipped into the dark forest, Dash and Dingo fought on, barely noticing they had gone.

With the clearing and its fighting inhabitants far behind her, Saderia padded through the dense, dark woods with a scowl, never tearing her eyes off the land ahead of her. Her heart still burned with rage at the thought of her annoying friends, but she tried to push it away and focus on the task at hand. Without a word, she wound absently through the trees and looked up to study their dark trunks carefully. Her heart leapt up with hope when she caught sight of more low scratch marks littering some of the black oaks around her. All of them seemed to illuminate a clear path that Bunny must have forged.

"Do you see a black pup anywhere?" she hissed, casting Jeb a curious glance.

When Jeb frowned and slowly shook his head, Saderia bit back a sigh and looked at the trees around her to search for more scratch marks. Her eyes instantly snapped to an enormous dead tree towering in front of her with the same low scratch mark at its base. A bush that towered several feet over her own head rose up beside the dead tree, completely covered in thorns. In front of the bush was a small patch of churned up earth. A sign that Bunny had gone through the undergrowth?

After a moment of deliberation, Saderia carefully stepped toward the prickly bush, searching for a way around it. Unfortunately, there wasn't one. Only tall dead trees and similar prickly bushes stood in a wide circle around the bush, hiding whatever lay beyond it in shadows and providing no easy way to get around the thorns. Lovely.

Heaving a sigh, Saderia braced herself and closed her eyes. Signaling for Jeb to follow her, she reluctantly ducked down to crawl under

the wild thorn bush. Thorns stabbed at her sides the instant she slipped into the bush, but she ignored the sharp stings. As fast as she could, she crawled out on the other side of the bush and opened her eyes. The instant she did, her breath caught in her throat.

A small, clean strip of woods not crowded by trees and bushes spread out before her eyes like a secret passageway hidden behind the undergrowth. Dozens of thorny bushes and trees rose up on all sides to block it in. All around her, the wild green grass spread out in a wide, open clearing where a tiny hint of moonlight managed to break through the canopy. In the very center of the clearing was a tall, smooth gray rock slanted up toward the sky. Standing on top of the rock was a small pitch black pup with large, rabbit-like ears and a tensely flicking tail.

Saderia's eyes widened in shock. "Bunny!"

With a gasp, she darted toward the tiny black pup with Jeb close behind her. At the sound of her name, the pup's ears pricked up in surprise. In a flash, she whipped around to face them with wide, blazing amber eyes. At once, she bared her fangs in a harsh, threatening snarl, her voice oddly low compared to her usual high-pitched squeak. Stunned, Saderia skidded to a halt right in front of the rock with Jeb close beside her, her eyes growing wide with surprise. Before Saderia could even begin to try to calm the snarling pup, Bunny had already stopped growling. With cold, flashing amber eyes, she slowly sat back and wrapped her tail calmly around her paws, her panic gone and her head tilted upward in an almost condescending way.

"Oh," she growled, peering at them through half-lidded eyes. "It's you. The Princess and the...thing." With an absent flick of her tail, she turned her back on them and gazed out at the woods, seeming almost bored. "What do you two want?"

While Jeb narrowed his eyes with a hurt frown, Saderia simply sighed and studied Bunny closely. As odd as it was, in this dark, eerie forest, the pup somehow unnerved her. The way she had snapped from vicious to calm so quickly made her head spin. Shaking the thoughts out of her head, she merely let out a quiet breath and tapped the pup lightly with her paw, ignoring her annoyed glare. "Bunny, everyone's looking for you. Why did you go missing?"

Bunny simply shrugged and ignored her. "I felt like it."

Saderia narrowed her eyes and bit back an annoyed growl. “All right, Bunny, I am really sick of dealing with attitudes today. Can you *please* tell me...”

“Shh!” Before Saderia could finish her sentence, Bunny suddenly whipped around to face her with blazing amber eyes. “Be quiet!” When Saderia looked up at her in shock, Bunny cut her eyes from side to side and tensely lashed her tail. “Listen!”

Saderia blinked in surprise. “Listen to what?”

Bunny shot her a dark glare out of the corner of her eye and flattened her ears with a look of disbelief. “Can’t you hear it?”

Saderia stared up at her in surprise and slowly shook her head. “Hear what?”

Bunny let out a low growl of frustration. “Those *voices!* Can’t you hear them whispering? They’re everywhere!” When Saderia just blinked and stared at her in shock, Bunny rolled her eyes and looked away with a scowl. “Never mind. Just be quiet. Maybe I can actually hear what they’re saying this time.”

With wide eyes, Saderia merely stared up at Bunny in silence, not daring to say a word. Pricking her ears, she struggled to listen for the ‘whispers’ Bunny had mentioned, but no matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t hear a thing. The forest was completely silent.

With wide, bewildered eyes, Jeb gazed around at the woods and nervously shuffled his paws. Looking uneasy, he leaned closer to Saderia to hiss in her ear. “Do...do you hear any whispers?”

While Saderia just shook her head, Bunny shot him a glare and hissed, “*Shh!*” When Jeb shrank back in unease, Bunny simply closed her eyes and lifted her head up high, turning her back to them. Her huge, rabbit-like ears twitched erratically, as if a thousand different sounds were battering them. Yet no matter how much Saderia strained her ears to listen, she could hear nothing. Several minutes passed in silence until Saderia had finally had enough.

“Bunny, I don’t hear anything,” she sighed, trying to hide the exasperation in her voice. “You must be hallucinating.”

Before she could say another word, Bunny suddenly whipped around to face her, her eyes flaming with rage and almost hatred. Flattening her ears, she glared at Saderia and let out a furious growl. “It’s *there*, you

idiot! Just because *you* can't hear it doesn't mean I'm stupid or hallucinating! There's something there, whether you believe me or not!"

Saderia blinked in shock and nervously took a step back, holding up a paw to try to calm her down. "Okay, okay," she stammered, unable to hide her unease. "Calm down, Bunny."

Bunny just curled her lip and looked away in annoyance. "Stupid forest food," she muttered under her breath.

Saderia narrowed her eyes and tried to hide a scowl, beginning to run out of patience. "Look, we really need to get going..."

Bunny cast her a dark glance out of the corner of her eye. "I'm not going anywhere," she growled. "Not until I find Tawny, that is."

Saderia's ears pricked up in surprise. "Tawny? You don't know where she is?"

"No, genius, that's why she's missing." Rolling her eyes, Bunny turned back to face Saderia with a distasteful scowl. "Why do you think I came here in the first place?"

Saderia blinked in misunderstanding. "What do you mean?"

Bunny let out a long-suffering sigh and pressed a paw to her forehead, as if she thought Saderia was a complete idiot. Shaking her head, she cut her eyes at Saderia and let out an annoyed breath. "I came here a few hours ago to find Tawny so that the evil animal couldn't hurt her."

Saderia stared at Bunny in shock. "What? What evil animal? And how did you know Tawny had gone missing if you were all the way in the desert?"

"I don't know, I just had a feeling," Bunny snapped, wrinkling her nose at Saderia. "Don't make me explain everything—I don't have time. In the desert, I got this feeling that Tawny had been chasing after someone and that the one she had been chasing after was evil. I don't know if they're going to hurt her, but I don't want her around that creep, so I came here to find her. I know she's around here somewhere, but I don't know where. I kind of got distracted by the whispers, but I *tried* to listen to them to see if they could tell me where to find Tawny."

Saderia had absolutely no idea what she was talking about, but instead of dwelling on it, she simply shook it off, knowing she didn't have time to work out the meaning of the pup's babbling. "Well, I think I know where Tawny is, Bunny. Or I at least have a good idea of where we should

start searching. We're looking for her, too. If you come with us, we can all look for her."

"Well, isn't that just swell? We can all team up together?" Despite her biting, sarcastic tone, Bunny leapt off the top of the smooth rock with a weary sigh and a roll of her eyes. "Fine. I'm coming with you. But only as long as *none* of you try to carry me. I *hate* that!"

Saderia sighed and resisted the urge to roll her eyes. "Deal. Just be careful when you go through that thorn bush."

Bunny snorted and gave her a leering smirk. "I'm so small the thorns don't even touch me. You're the ones who should be careful."

While Jeb just stared at the tiny pup in shock over her strange behavior, Saderia just rolled her eyes and turned to follow the tiny pup when she bounded toward the thorn bush, all but used to her strangeness. Besides, after what had happened with Dash and Dingo, she had bigger problems than some strange pup with an ego bigger than the desert she came from.

So caught up in her thoughts, she didn't notice when Bunny pricked her ears again and paused in front of the thorn bush, her amber eyes unusually dark and serious. Tiny, indistinguishable whispers brushed against her ears, making her eyes narrow with unease. As she trailed along behind Saderia, trying to ignore them, she simply shook her head and let out a low murmur in a voice so soft it was nearly lost with the whispers.

"There's something very wrong with this forest."

By the time Saderia and Jeb returned to the clearing with Bunny trailing mutinously behind them, the fight was over. Dash lay on one side of the clearing against a tall oak tree, panting and ignoring the blood dripping through his fur. Dingo lay slumped across the grass on the other side of the clearing, his sides heaving with heavy pants and his face splattered with blood. Both of them glared each other down without making a move toward each other, never once daring to blink or look away in fear that it would signal defeat. Neither of them moved an inch.

Saderia let out a long, annoyed sigh. "Have you two finally cooled off?"

Dingo glanced up at her out of the corner of his eye and shrugged. "Not really. We just got tired."

While Saderia rolled her eyes, Dash just sighed and buried his face in his paws with a low groan.

“Dingo?” At the sound of the high-pitched voice, Dingo looked up just in time to see Bunny step out from behind Saderia’s paws. A wide smirk tugged at the corners of the pup’s mouth and her whiskers twitched with amusement. “What happened here?”

Dingo sighed and slowly shook his head. “I see you found Bunny,” he called, raising an eyebrow at Saderia.

Saderia just nodded with a tight smile that looked more like a scowl.

Before Saderia could stop her, Bunny leapt away from her and trotted over to Dingo, an amused sneer on her face. When she reached him, she merely raised her eyebrows at him and let out a quiet snicker. “You look funny, Dingo. Were you fighting with that piece of forest food?”

Letting out a quiet breath, Dingo slowly pushed himself to his paws and rolled his eyes. “Yes, Bunny. Let’s not discuss it.”

Bunny flicked her tail indifferently and just grinned. “All right, I won’t discuss it with you, as long as you didn’t get beat by forest food. I’ll just discuss it with Rip when we get back.”

Dingo rolled his eyes, but couldn’t hide a faint grin. “Great.” He paused, then narrowed his eyes and slowly looked down at the pup, his expression darkening with seriousness. “Anyway, why did you run away, Bunny? You know your brother hates it when you do stuff like this.”

Bunny just shrugged carelessly. “If Lightning doesn’t like it, that’s his problem. And if you don’t like *that*, then that’s your problem.”

Dingo just shook his head slowly. “Do you always talk to Leaders like this?”

“Of course,” Bunny replied with a frown and a flippant flick of her tail. “Why do you think I got exiled so easily? Besides, you’re no more special than me, Leader or not.”

While Dash had a sudden favorable change of opinion toward Bunny, Saderia just sighed and paced to the center of the clearing, trying to hide her impatience. “All right, everyone,” she called, gazing around at her four companions with dark, flashing eyes. “Are we going to keep looking or what? We need to find Tawny. And this time, there will be *no* fights. Got it?”

Dash and Dingo cut their eyes at each other and flattened their ears with dark, deadly scowls. For a long, tense moment, the two glared each other down with fiery amber and brown eyes, then reluctantly made themselves look away. To Saderia's relief, both of them managed a weak nod and a weary sigh of defeat.

"Got it."

Chapter Fourteen

Secret Paradise

Saderia and Bunny led the way through the dense, shadowy woods, winding past huge dead trees and stumbling through thick masses of undergrowth. Dash, Dingo, and Jeb trailed soundlessly behind them, trying not to trip over the thick weeds and roots. At Saderia's request, Jeb had placed himself between Dash and Dingo, though not without a lingering sense of fear at being caught in between them. So far, no fights had erupted between the two of them again, though they shot each other vicious glares and low snarls with practically every step.

Blood from the wounds inflicted during their fight still speckled their fur, but they didn't seem to notice, too lost in their own thoughts. Neither one of them had spoken once since they had set out into the forest. The silence between them was thick with tension, but it was at least better than listening to them snap at each other every step of the way. Saderia still bristled when she thought of the fight between them, but she forced her anger away and made herself focus on the task at hand. After all, they still had a missing cub to find.

Following close behind Saderia and scanning the dark woods for any sign of Tawny, Bunny paused when she wandered around a copse of dead trees and pricked up her ears. Wonder and dead seriousness flickered across her bright amber eyes. "The whispers..." she murmured. "They're louder here..."

Dingo paused behind the small pup and looked up with a bewildered frown. "What's she talking about?"

Saderia glanced back at him out of the corner of her eye and let out a quiet sigh. "It's a long story." Resisting the urge to roll her eyes, she looked back at Bunny and lightly flicked her tail, deciding to humor her. "Can you hear what they're saying now?"

Bunny wrinkled her nose and scowled. "No. They're louder now... almost like they're closer...but I still can't tell what they're trying to say."

It's almost like something's muffling their voices."

While Dingo frowned and Dash shook his head slowly, Saderia just shrugged and gazed absently out at the forest. She wasn't sure whether or not she believed the pup had actually heard something. Obviously, no one else had heard it, but stranger things had happened.

Narrowing her eyes, Bunny took a few steps deeper into the forest and frowned, flicking her tail to signal for the others to follow. "I think we should keep going this way in the direction of the whispers. I think Tawny might be wherever the voices are coming from."

Saderia gazed darkly around at the forest and just sighed. "It's worth a try." It wasn't as if she had much else to go on. Apart from a tiny paw print Dash had found and the ramblings of a possibly crazy pup, there wasn't much else to point her in the direction of the small leopard cub. She might as well go with what she had.

"Come on then!" Without another word, Bunny suddenly shot off into the darkness, practically blending into the shadows and leaving the others rushing to keep up with her.

With a sharp gasp, Saderia leapt after her as fast as she could, feeling her heart skip a beat. Faster than Saderia could have imagined, Bunny shot out across the wild, grassy forest floor, her black fur blending in with the shadows and her tiny body almost disappearing beneath the overgrown grass. In a flash, she darted through the endless sea of clustered dead trees and thick bushes, never missing a beat. Her long, rabbit-like ears sleeked back as she hurtled through the forest, moving with an odd agility until it looked like her paws hardly touched the ground. Even as she ran, though, her ears twitched wildly on their own, struggling to listen to sounds only they seemed able to hear. While Saderia and her friends struggled to keep up, she flew through the woods, seeming to know exactly where she was going.

"Bunny!" With an exasperated cry, Saderia staggered through the dense trees after her, struggling to keep up. "Where are you going?"

"Just follow me!" Bunny's high-pitched shout echoed back to her through the darkness from somewhere up ahead. "I know where to go now!"

"How?" Saderia yelled back, not expecting an answer. None came.

Taking in wild, desperate gasps of air, Saderia leapt through gaps in the thick trees and darted after Bunny as fast as she could, her mind spinning with disbelief. Bunny's effortless navigation of the dense forest stunned Saderia, especially when she considered how Dingo had so many problems with it. Even so, she forced it out of her mind, knowing she didn't have time to wonder about it.

In a wild streak of black Saderia could just barely see, Bunny flew through the forest as if it were nothing, leaping through gaps in the trees and darting deeper and deeper into the dense woods. Desperately, Saderia struggled to follow, but found herself falling farther and farther behind. With every step she took, the woods grew wilder and thicker. The grass rose up higher and higher, and the trees only seemed to grow closer and closer together. The deeper into the forest she moved, the closer the trees grew, until barely an inch separated their gnarled trunks. The only thing Saderia could do was leap through the tiny gaps just above the bases of their trunks and spring through the myriad of trees like a rabbit, desperately chasing after Bunny.

As fast as she could, Saderia stumbled desperately through the hordes of painfully close trees after the pup. Wincing, she squinted at the land before her and felt her heart skip when Bunny raced out so far ahead of her she nearly disappeared from sight. She gritted her teeth. "Bunny! Slow down!"

Despite her plea, the pup refused to slow down. Running even faster than before, she darted between two tall trees and vanished into the shadows, letting the dense woods swallow her up. Saderia's eyes went wide with shock and her heart skipped a beat. "Bunny!"

"Over here!" The pup's high-pitched cry echoed out from somewhere in the darkness ahead of her. "Hurry!"

Saderia frantically turned to follow the sound of the voice and dove between two close trees, nearly scraping both her sides on the bark of each trunk. Wincing, she forced herself to keep running toward the voice as fast as she could. With every step, the trees only grew closer and closer together until she could barely even see the ground past the trunks. The grass grew so high and so thick she could barely distinguish between grass stalks and bushes. As she struggled to race through the thick woods, the tangled stalks seemed to wrap around her paws and drag her back, as if trying to keep her

out. Some stalks of grass grew so high they tickled her muzzle. She couldn't even begin to imagine how Bunny had gotten through it when the grass was taller than she was. Thick, thorn-covered bushes seemed to guard the rough trunks of practically every tree, so large and wide that Saderia nearly got stuck in one when she tried to leap over it.

Gritting her teeth, she stumbled out into the tall grass on the other side of the huge bush and forced herself to keep running through the thick, shadowy woods. Her heart beat faster with every step. "What kind of place is this?" Her voice seemed to echo all around her, as if bouncing off the trees themselves. Her heart skipped. "Bunny!" Desperately, she scanned the darkness in front of her for any sign of the tiny pup, needing her voice to lead her out of the woodsy labyrinth. As much as she hated to admit it, her well-being and her chances of ever getting out of the woods now depended entirely on Bunny.

"Over here!" Bunny's impatient voice rang through the trees. "*Hurry up, would you?*"

Saderia gritted her teeth. "Sor-ry!" Just barely avoiding swerving into another tree, she struggled to keep moving. At that point, she could barely see even one foot in front of her through the thick trees and the deep, clinging grass.

"Come on!" Bunny's voice seemed to echo through the dark, silent woods, as if ringing out over a great distance. "Hurry up so we can follow the river!"

Saderia wanted to scream, 'What river?' but she just bit her tongue and kept running, determined to make it through the woods.

Her muscles screamed with pain and her legs seemed to burn with every clumsy step. Shallow pants heaved out of her throat and her lungs burned from the lack of air. Just when she started to lose hope, the trees slowly started to thin out, leaving only a few tightly packed trunks. Gasping for breath, Saderia stumbled wildly through the thick grass, leaping through only a few close trees and otherwise keeping her weary paws on the ground. "Bunny!" she choked out. "Where...?"

"This way!" Bunny's voice boomed out from somewhere just ahead. "Come on, slowpoke! You're holding me up!"

Saderia let out a low growl of aggravation. Dodging through the trees, she struggled to keep running, though she found herself moving faster

as the trees thinned out. Though not exactly far enough apart to give her a decent space to run, the trees grew thinner and thinner the farther she moved. Weaving her way past dozens and dozens of gnarled old trunks, Saderia stumbled through the woods and felt her breath catch when the trees suddenly fell away around her. With a stunned gasp, she staggered to a halt and looked up in shock.

Before her, the land sloped down into a wide, grassy clearing surrounded on all sides by dense brush, thick weeds, and towering trees. Bright moonlight shone down through the loose canopy overhead, lighting up the soft, dewy grass rustling all over the clearing. In the very center of the enormous glade, a shimmering pool of bright blue water lapped gently at its sides. Dark, sparkling wet rocks bordered the entire back edge of the small lake, forming careful ridges down into the pool of water. A cracked, crumbling old stone slab that in better days might have been perfectly cut in an odd rectangular shape stood propped up on one of the middle ridges at the very back of the lake. On the stone were strange markings and engravings that Saderia couldn't quite understand.

The lake spilled out into a soft, lapping river that ran off to the right. The softly trickling water raced straight through the clearing into another thick woods to the right of the clearing. Seeming even thicker than the woods she had just left, the maze of undergrowth was draped in dark shadows that made it almost impossible to see what lay beyond the wall of pitch black trees and bushes guarding its outskirts. Even the sight of the shadowy woods sent a shiver racing down Saderia's spine. Seeming oblivious to the eerie feeling emanating from the dark woods, Bunny stood on the very edge of the lake, gazing down the path of the sparkling river with wide eyes. Her bright amber irises glimmered in the moonlight.

Saderia blinked in shock, hardly daring to believe what she was seeing. "What...is this place...?" Barely daring to breathe, she stepped closer to the sparkling pool of moonlit water, her heart beating faster with wonder.

At the sound of her voice, Bunny glanced back at her and narrowed her eyes with a scowl. "Who cares what it is? Tawny's around here somewhere." Before Saderia could ask how she knew that, she pointed to a patch of dirt beside the river where a tiny paw print had been pressed into the earth. Saderia's eyes widened and her heart skipped a beat at the sight of

the tiny print. Bunny had been right all along. She had truly managed to lead them to Tawny.

When Saderia looked back at Bunny, her eyes widened in shock. The tiny pup's huge, rabbit-like ears were pricked and twitching like crazy, as if they were being assaulted by a million different sounds at once. Her amber eyes shone with a bright, burning curiosity that Saderia had never seen before. Her entire body practically shook with anticipation. "The whispers are the loudest here," she murmured, as if in explanation for her odd behavior. "They're coming from somewhere around here...And Tawny's with them..."

Saderia frowned and studied Bunny for a long moment with dark, curious eyes, then slowly turned to face the long, lapping river. "Do you think she's somewhere at the end of this river?"

"I don't think, I know." With a light flick of her tail, Bunny leapt off the top ridge along the edge of the pool onto the grass where Saderia was standing. Without another word, she turned to trot off down the side of the river toward the dark, foreboding woods rising up to the right of it. "Come on," she called. "Let's go."

Saderia frowned and held back, eyeing the dark woods with a wary, uncertain scowl. "Um...shouldn't we wait for the others?"

Bunny glanced back over her shoulder and sneered. "Why? Are you scared?"

Saderia frowned and tensely flicked her tail. "No, I'm not scared," she lied, wondering why a tiny pup like Bunny wasn't. "I just don't want to leave the others behind in that labyrinth."

Bunny just shrugged and sat back on the grass with an impatient flick of her tail. "Have it your way."

Saderia narrowed her eyes and studied the pup warily for a tense moment of silence, then turned to look back at the woods behind her at the sound of a wild crashing noise and the crackling of leaves. Behind her, Dash, Dingo, and Jeb finally stumbled out of the dense woods she had just escaped from. Gasping for air, the three of them frantically staggered away from the enclosing trees, their paws wrapped with weeds and grass and their fur littered with leaves. In a crowd, all three of them stumbled out into the clearing and caught themselves just a few steps away from the river. Without a word, all three of them froze and turned to look around, their

eyes wide with wonder and awe. Dash and Dingo's enmity seemed to momentarily disappear. Side by side, they gazed out at the wide clearing in amazement and cast stunned glances back at the thick woods they had just escaped.

Blinking several times, Dash stared back at the woods he had just broken out of, then whipped back around to look up at Saderia in shock. "Wh-What's with this place?"

"This is why I hate trees," Dingo muttered under his breath, shaking stalks of grass and piercing thorns from his shaggy brown fur.

Jeb stumbled toward the river on shaky yellow legs, his bicolor eyes wide with fear and panic. "What's going on?"

Saderia took a deep breath and let it out slowly, trying to hide her own fear. As confidently as she could, she pointed toward the dark woods to the right of the river. "We're going in there," she murmured. "Tawny's got to be in there somewhere."

While Dash gaped at the thick woods in horror and Jeb shuddered, Dingo winced, but merely lowered his head with a long, tense sigh. "All right. If Tawny's in there, then fine. Let's go." Struggling to catch his breath, the canine stepped closer to Saderia and Bunny, then turned to glance back at Dash and Jeb and narrowed his eyes. "Are you two in?"

Dash hesitated for half a second, then hastily nodded his head even as he eyed the woods fearfully, not wanting to be outdone. "Y-You bet!"

"Jeb?" Saderia murmured, her eyes gleaming with tension and sympathy.

Jeb swallowed hard and shakily stepped toward them on trembling paws, nodding as bravely as he could. "I-I'm in."

"Good." Before Saderia could say a word, Bunny spoke up and gazed out at the four animals with a wide sneer. A bit annoyed that the young pup was acting like their leader, Saderia turned to look back at her. With flashing amber eyes, the pup stared evenly back at them and raised an eyebrow, her tail flicking impatiently back and forth. "Can we get *going* now?"

Narrowing her eyes, Saderia opened her mouth to reply, then froze. Before she could say a word, something flitted through the dark woods on the other side of the river, just barely visible out of the corner of her eye. Her breath caught. Feeling her paws tense and her blood run as cold as ice,

she whipped around to stare at the thick, imposing woods around her, but saw nothing but wild, enclosing trees everywhere she turned. Her heart skipped a beat. She could have sworn she had just seen a shadow dart behind one of those trees. “What was...?”

“Let’s go!” Before Saderia could get another word out, Bunny let out a sharp hiss. Without waiting for anyone’s response, she whipped around and dove into the thick undergrowth on the right side of the pond, her short black tail streaming wildly out behind her.

Saderia’s heart skipped a beat. Shaking off her fears, she hastily whipped around and darted after her with Dash, Dingo, and Jeb hard on her heels. With a shaky breath, she narrowed her eyes and made herself dive into the thick forest after the young pup, forcing herself to forget about the eerie shadow. It was probably just her own paranoia. After all, the strange, maze-like woods had already heightened her senses, and it *was* dark. Shadows were pretty much the norm.

Shaking the thoughts from her mind, she raced rapidly after Bunny, not wanting to lose her. The instant she broke out into the thick, shadowy woods, she found herself falling back into her old pattern of leaping between the trees. Inside the pitch black woods, the towering oaks and dead, gnarled trunks grew so close together she could barely find an inch of space between them. With every step, the landscape only seemed to grow wilder and wilder. The grass grew taller than ever, while the trees seemed to squeeze even closer together. Fighting to keep her wits about her as the darkness of the woods closed in on her, Saderia struggled to keep dodging around the trees, refusing to give in to her fear and exhaustion.

“This way!” Bunny’s voice echoed through the shadows, seeming a million miles away.

Saderia squinted her eyes, trying desperately to see through the nearly impenetrable darkness in the woods where not even a tiny sliver of moonlight dared seep in to light the way. As she bounded through the dark, endless maze of trees, it seemed as if it would never end. As if the end—if it actually had one—would be nothing but a world of pure darkness. Hiding a shiver, Saderia forced herself to keep running and plunged deeper into the shadowy woods, determined to reach the end.

For what seemed like hours, Saderia leapt desperately through the trees with Bunny’s sneering, high-pitched voice her only guide. Just when

her legs began to burn and her mind began to race with helplessness, something that looked almost like a light flickered through the pitch blackness all around her. It wasn't even a light per se. It wasn't a bright white light that shone through the shadows of the thick trees around her. Instead, it was a sort of dull grayish color lingering somewhere up ahead—nothing even close to actual light, but something at least lighter than the darkness around her. At the same time, an odd thundering sound slowly rose in the air, growing louder and louder with each step. Saderia's mind whirled with bewilderment. Up ahead, Bunny's stunned gasp and wild squeal echoed out through the shadows.

"Be careful when you get out of the woods!"

Saderia's eyes widened with hope. Hardly daring to breathe, she leapt through a thick copse of trees and nearly gasped when the woods fell away around her. On unsteady paws, she staggered away from the dense woods onto a stretch of moonlit grass and sharply lifted her head to look up. Her heart almost stopped in her chest. In one sudden rush, her hope vanished in a wave of paralyzing fear.

In a flash, the rugged edge of the platform jutting out of Rock's monstrous den appeared before her eyes. Screams and howls of agony tickled her ears, and the faint smell of blood brushed across her nose. Her breath caught. Past the enormous edge of the platform, she could just make out a stretch of bloodstained sand. Behind her, she could practically feel the hot, stinky breath of Rock on her shoulder. Every part of her tensed with terror.

With a shaky gasp, Saderia squeezed her eyes shut, feeling her entire body tense and go numb with fear. Struggling desperately to remember what Dingo had told her, she made herself speak up in a soft, shaky whisper that only she could hear, fighting to push the vision away. "My name is... Saderia...I live in the forest. I go to school. I have friends...named Dash, Dingo, and Jeb. The sky is blue. The grass is green. The forest is calm..." Slowly, she opened her eyes and felt her heart lift with hope when the vision disappeared. "I'm calm..."

Gradually, the terrifying vision faded away into nothing more than a memory. Hardly daring to breathe, Saderia slowly looked up and gasped, her eyes growing wide with shock. Taking a clumsy step forward, she gazed out at the scene before her in awe.

Just a few steps ahead of her, the tiny stretch of grassy land ended in an abrupt cliff. The long, lapping river raced right past her paws and flew off the edge of the tall cliff. An enormous, awe-inspiring waterfall cascaded down a slope of jutting, craggy gray rocks into a wide valley below, seeming to sparkle in the moonlight. The wild roaring sound of rushing water thundered in her ears, and the light splash of the waterfall's spray dampened her fur when she stepped up to the very edge of the cliff right beside the rushing river. An amazing sight spread out before her eyes.

Moonlight dappled the roaring waterfall. Seeming to glow silver in the pure light filtering through the thick canopy above, the waterfall thundered down the side of the slanted, rocky cliff and crashed down onto a cluster of weathered rocks jutting up out of a wide pool of water below. Ripples seemed to dance across the moonlit surface of the lake below the cliff. Beyond the tiny pool of silver water, the grass grew wild and free.

A soft, chilly wind whispered through the clearing, making the wild, overgrown grasses ripple like waves in an enormous ocean. Dozens of towering trees rose up from the hidden valley at the base of the waterfall, rising up so high they towered above even the top of the cliff. Nowhere near as enclosing as the dense trees she had just escaped from, the wizened old trunks and branches seemed to protect the glade rather than hide it.

Just a few feet away from the pool at the base of the waterfall, several enormous gray boulders sat proudly in the center of the valley. One smooth stone towered up over the grass, while several smaller rocks sat scattered around it, making it seem all the more powerful and proud. A few feet away from the pool of water near the right edge of the valley, a few small rectangular stone slabs jutted up out of the ground. Hidden in the shadows of the trees shrouding them, the stones couldn't be seen clearly, but Saderia guessed they were engraved with the same strange symbols that had been carved across the similar-looking stone propped up on the ridge of the lake on the other side of the dense woods.

With wide eyes, Saderia gazed down at the valley below her in awe, then slowly raised her head to look up at the woods surrounding her. Her heart nearly skipped with amazement. High above the wild grasses and trees rising up in the valley below, enormous, curved ridges ran along the edges of the valley. The topmost ridge sloped down from the stretch of grass at the top of the cliff by the waterfall and curved along the edges of

the wide valley. Different layers of craggy ridges spiraled down into the valley on smooth, carefully placed ledges, like stone steps leading down into the glade. Thick grass and bushes bloomed out from the cracks in the stone, hiding holes carved into the walls of the ledges that she could only assume led into dark caves. Thick, shadowy woods surrounded the entire glade and raced right along the edge of the topmost ridge, leaving only a few inches of space to walk along the edges. It seemed the valley was protected and well hidden by the dense woods from every angle and direction imaginable.

Behind Saderia, soft gasps rang out over the sharp crunching of twigs and leaves. Without even having to look, Saderia knew her friends had stumbled out from the woods behind her and caught sight of the incredible valley. Slowly, she shook her head, unable to tear her eyes off the breathtaking glade. “What...What is this?”

Standing a few paces away from her near the very edge of the cliff, Bunny opened her mouth to snap back at her, but nothing came out. With eyes shining with awe, she gazed down at the massive valley below her, hardly daring to breathe. For a long moment, the pup stared down at the valley with eyes as wide as Saderia’s without saying a word, then suddenly pricked up her ears. In a flash, her amazed expression vanished in a frown of tense seriousness and curiosity. “Those whispers...” she murmured, straining her ears to listen. “They’re so loud here...”

Saderia spared her a stunned glance, still unable to hear anything other than the lapping of the river and the wild roaring of the waterfall. Shaking off her bewilderment, she gazed down at the valley and slowly shook her head, unable to say a word. Behind her, her friends slowly crept up beside her to gaze out at the valley, their eyes wide with awe and astonishment.

“This place is...incredible,” Dingo whispered, his voice oddly subdued.

“This is amazing,” Dash murmured at the same time, unconsciously agreeing with the animal he had been fighting with just a few hours earlier.

“I can’t believe this place exists,” Jeb choked out. With wide, awed blue and green eyes, he gazed up at Saderia and held his breath. “Do you think we’re the only ones who know about it?”

Blinking in surprise, Saderia slowly gazed back down at the shadowy valley, feeling her breath catch in her throat. With wide eyes, she took in the wild, untamed grasses; the thick, gnarled trees; and the crumbling but otherwise undisturbed stones. “I think so,” she whispered, her eyes growing wide at her own soft words. Had this valley really been left hidden and undisturbed for as long as it seemed?

“This place...” At the sound of Bunny’s voice, Saderia turned to see the pup staring down at the valley with wide eyes. Awe and disbelief glowed in her wide amber irises even as a shadow flitted over her face. “This place...” Seeming to struggle to finish her own thought, she gazed out at the clearing and slowly shook her head. “There’s something strange...” Her huge ears seemed to struggle to pick up sounds and her eyes narrowed in an intense, desperate focus. Every inch of her small body seemed tense with concentration. Even the tiny black hairs on her short canine tail seemed to stand still.

Before Saderia could say a word, the tiny pup suddenly snapped around to face something at the very bottom of the cliff right before her. Her eyes widened in shock. “Tawny!”

Blinking in surprise, Saderia whipped around to follow her gaze and let out a gasp of shock. Just below the steep, jutting gray rocks leading down the side of the cliff, a tiny orange figure waded through the tall grass. At the sound of Bunny’s shrill voice, the tiny animal looked up in shock, then stumbled back with a wild cry of fear and surprise when she caught sight of them.

“Tawny!” Before anyone could stop her, Bunny suddenly darted forward and leapt right off the edge of the cliff. Saderia’s heart skipped and a cry rose in her throat, but she never got a chance to voice it. As easily as if she were merely leaping through the desert, the tiny pup landed neatly on a jutting boulder just beneath the cliff and lunged down to the next one. Expertly, she leapt from rock to rock alongside the roaring waterfall, lunging lower and lower with each leap. Her amber eyes shone with determination. Gritting her teeth, Bunny bounded down the last few boulders and dove into the thick grasses covering the bottom of the clearing.

The instant her paws touched the ground at the bottom of the valley, she froze. As if she had been shocked, every hair on her body suddenly

stood on end and every inch of her tensed at once. Her eyes grew wide. For a split second, she looked as if she had been turned to stone. Feeling a wave of fear, Saderia lurched toward the edge of the cliff and started to call out to her to make sure she was okay, but never got the chance. Before she could utter a word, Bunny shook herself once, seeming to snap out of whatever had come over her. In a flash, she darted away from the wide pool of water just beside her and raced out into the valley, leaving a small trail through the tall, damp grass.

Instantly, she leapt toward Tawny and skidded to a halt in front of the tiny leopard cub, her amber eyes glowing with excitement. At the sound of eager, high-pitched voices, Saderia strained her ears to hear what they were squeaking to each other, but she was too far away to catch any of it. With a sigh of relief, she started to relax when the two young animals turned to bound back toward the wall of rocks jutting out beside the waterfall. In the same instant, though, she tensed with sudden fear, realizing that Tawny might not be brave enough to climb the sharp, slippery slope and that Bunny might not be patient enough to realize she probably wouldn't make it even if she did try. Her heart skipped.

"Wait!" she called, leaping to her paws. "I'll come get you!"

Her warning came too late. Without stopping to think about it, Bunny leapt forward in a flash of black fur and scraped her claws across a slippery gray boulder jutting out far above the valley, just barely catching the edge. Even from a distance, Saderia could see fear flash in her eyes when she started to slip backward. A second later, she let out a wild squeal of panic.

Saderia's heart lurched. "Hold on!" Without thinking, she suddenly lunged forward and dove off the edge of the cliff as fast as she could. For a second, time seemed to stand still. Air whipped past her and a bolt of pure fear and adrenaline shot through her body, making her blood turn to ice in her veins. For a split second, she seemed to hang suspended in midair over the valley, feeling air rushing past her and hearing her own heart pounding in her ears. A second later, she plummeted downward in a wild rush of air that knocked the breath from her.

With a soft gasp, Saderia landed clumsily on one of the slick, wet rocks jutting out just beside the waterfall, nearly slipping on the smooth stone. As fast as she could, she caught herself and leapt down to the next

rock and the one below it, struggling to keep herself from slipping and wondering how Bunny had made it look so easy. While Saderia leapt from boulder to boulder, Bunny slipped farther down to the very edge of her own jutting stone with a shrill shriek of fear. Desperately, she scrabbled at the slimy rock, struggling to keep her hold on the boulder and stop herself from falling down to her death. Below her, Tawny bounced wildly through the grass at the bottom of the valley, screaming desperately for Bunny not to fall.

On shaky paws, Saderia leapt down to the rock Bunny clung to and nearly slipped on the smooth, wet stone. Feeling her claws shaking against the rock, she struggled to keep her balance even as her legs wobbled beneath her. The instant she managed to steady herself, she leaned down as fast as she could and grabbed the scruff of Bunny's neck in her fangs. With a stunned yelp, Bunny swiped her paws wildly through the air as Saderia lifted her off the edge of the rock. Dangling numbly from Saderia's jaws, Bunny looked down at the valley below her and froze when she saw how far down it was. Swallowing nervously, she looked up to meet Saderia's gaze out of the corner of her eye and gave her a fiery glare.

"If you drop me, I'll kill you," she growled.

Saderia ignored her, too caught up in her own fearful thoughts. Struggling to keep herself from slipping, she turned and tried to leap back up the jutting rocks to the top of the cliff above her. In a flash, she bounded off the slippery rock below her and lunged up onto another jutting stone, but never got a chance to jump higher. The instant she landed on the rock, her paws slipped and she nearly stumbled backward. With a muted gasp, she just barely managed to catch herself and stop herself from falling.

Gasps of fear rang out above her.

"Saderia!" At almost the exact same time, Dash and Dingo lurched toward the edge of the cliff and peered down at her with wide eyes, their frightened shouts ringing out in unison.

In the same instant, Jeb let out a cry of fear. "Be careful!"

Fighting back her fears, Saderia narrowed her eyes and forced herself to calm down. Memories of dangling from Rock's monstrous den and images of falling to her death flickered on the periphery of her vision, but she forced the thoughts away as hard as she could, chanting the words Dingo had given her over and over again in her mind. Keeping the visions

at bay, she forced herself to find her footing, then shakily turned to look up to face the top of the tall cliff. The roaring of the waterfall boomed in her ears. Gathering all of her strength and bravery, Saderia tensed her muscles, then leapt upward with all of her might.

Desperately, she grasped the jutting edge of the next rock and fought to pull herself up, just barely managing to stop herself from slipping backward. Bunny dangled fearfully from her jaws as Saderia struggled to pull herself up and fought to stop herself from remembering hanging on the edge of Rock's ledge in the same way. Pushing the thoughts away, Saderia forcefully hauled herself over the edge of the rock and made herself leap to the next without stopping. On unsteady paws, she leapt from boulder to boulder, hoping desperately that she wouldn't slip. Finding her strength, she lunged upward as fast as she could, forcing herself not to linger to catch her balance.

After what felt like ages, she finally lunged toward the very top of the cliff and sank her claws deep into thick grass and dirt. With the help of her friends, she clumsily managed to pull herself over the edge and staggered out on top of the cliff right beside the waterfall. When at last her paws were finally planted firmly on the ground, she stifled a sigh of relief. On unsteady paws, she stumbled away from the ledge and hastily set Bunny down on the ground, feeling her legs go numb with weariness.

The second Saderia let go of her, Bunny stumbled backward onto the grass with a shaky sigh. Narrowing her eyes, she turned to look up at Saderia and eyed her with an uncharacteristically subdued expression. Catching Saderia's gaze, she frowned and hesitated for a long moment, then looked down with a weak, uncomfortable shrug. "Thanks, I guess...but I still hate being carried!"

Saderia just rolled her eyes. Turning around, she eyed the edge of the cliff with a nervous shiver, trying to psych herself up to leap back down the slick rocks to get Tawny, who still stood at the bottom of the valley letting out terrified cries and demanding to know if Bunny was all right. Trying to gather her courage, she started to step back toward the edge of the cliff, but before she could find the strength to dive back over the edge again, Dash suddenly stepped out in front of her.

"I'll get her," he murmured, casting Saderia a tense, worried look out of the corner of his eye.

Before she could reply, he turned and dove off the edge of the cliff in a streak of shadowed brown fur. As fast as he could, he lunged down from rock to rock alongside the roaring waterfall and stumbled out into the thick grass at the bottom of the valley. Feeling her heart skip with fear, Saderia stumbled up to the edge of the cliff just in time to see him lean down and grab Tawny by the scruff of her neck. In a flash, he whipped around and lunged back toward the rocks jutting out from the cliff. Saderia's heart skipped when he hauled himself up onto the first rock and leapt up higher to the jutting stones above it.

With her heart pounding in her ears, she watched as he leapt upward from rock to rock, his paws slipping on the sleek stones but never losing their grip. In a few short bounds, he leapt to the top of the cliff and grabbed the edge. With Saderia, Dingo, and Jeb's help, he managed to haul himself up onto the top of the cliff and stumbled away from the edge. As soon as he was out of danger, Saderia forced herself to relax.

Letting out a shaky sigh, Dash staggered away from the edge of the cliff and leaned down to set Tawny down on the grass beside Bunny. With soft, trembling breaths, he glanced back at his friends out of the corner of his eye and awkwardly looked down. "Th-Thanks, guys."

"Anytime." With a flick of her tail, Saderia absently waved away his thanks. Narrowing her eyes, she paused, then whirled around to glare down at Tawny, her expression hardening in a sterner, more serious scowl. "Tawny!" she hissed with a sharp lash of her tail. "What were you doing sneaking off at night? Everyone is worried and looking for you! Even Bunny!"

Tawny winced and shrank away from Saderia's harsh gaze, her chocolate brown eyes glowing with fear and nervousness. "I-I'm sorry," she whimpered. "I just wanted to have an adventure like you..." Her eyes grew round with wonder. "I...I went out into the forest, and I saw some shadow in the woods go this way. I tried to follow it so I could save the day like you do..." She paused, then trailed off with a nervous whimper. "I won't do it again, I promise. I don't even know where I am. I just want to go home. This place is creepy."

"That, it is," Bunny muttered under her breath, gazing around at the valley with a tense glare and crossly lashing her tail.

At the sound of her voice, Tawny's brown eyes lit up with excitement. Letting out a delighted squeal, she pounced Bunny to the ground and grinned, ignoring the pup's yelp of surprise. "I didn't know you would come looking for me! I missed you!"

"Ugh..." Shooting her a cranky scowl, Bunny pushed her away and flattened her ears in annoyance. "Okay, okay, I get it. I missed you, too... Now get off..."

"Tawny..." Interrupting Bunny's annoyed muttering, Saderia gazed down at the cub and tensely narrowed her eyes, feeling a sting of unease in the pit of her stomach. "What were you following?"

Tawny blinked up at her in surprise, then just shrugged. "I don't know. Nothing, I guess. It was probably just a weird shadow in the woods." She shivered as she spoke and let out a soft whimper. "Can you take me back to my mom? It's all dark and scary out here...I don't want to be like you guys anymore..."

Saderia let out a long sigh and nodded absently. "All right, Tawny, I'll take you back to Mae—er...your mom. Bunny, as soon as we drop off Tawny, we'll find Rip, Tear, and Lightning, and you'll go back with them. Got it?"

Bunny snorted and flippantly flicked her tail. "You're not my Leader."

"Maybe not, but *I* am." With a stern frown, Dingo stalked toward Bunny and narrowed his eyes at the tiny pup. "There will be no more running away, Bunny."

Bunny narrowed her eyes in defiance, but seemed to shrink beneath her Leader's stern glare. After a tense moment of silence, she merely nodded and looked away, muttering resentfully under her breath. "Yes, Dingo..."

While Dingo simply nodded, Saderia let out a long sigh. Wearily, she turned to face the dark, dense woods behind her and suppressed a shiver. "All right, guys, let's get moving. We need to get out of here. Tawny, do you want me to carry you?" When Tawny nodded and darted toward her with a hopeful squeak, Saderia glanced past her at the tiny black pup and twitched her whiskers with a faint, amused grin. "Bunny?"

"Don't touch me." Giving her an annoyed scowl, Bunny instantly took a step back, her fur bristling. "I hate being carried. I'll lead."

When Saderia just rolled her eyes, Bunny abruptly turned around and started to stalk back toward the woods, her short black tail flicking tensely back and forth in annoyance. Behind her, Saderia quickly leaned down to pick up Tawny and started to trail after her, while Dash and Jeb fell into step behind her. Casting one quick glance back at the valley, Dingo hastily fell into step beside Bunny, giving her a light flick of his tail and a weak smile when he realized how exhausted she looked. Bunny scowled at him out of the corner of her eye, then paused. A second before she stepped into the shadows of the woods, she hesitated and slowly turned back to look up at Dingo. A dark, deathly serious shadow flitted across her face as she stared up into his eyes.

“Dingo?” Whispering in a voice inaudible to the forest animals behind her, Bunny leaned forward and darkly narrowed her eyes. “I need you to promise me something.”

Dingo blinked in surprise, then merely raised an eyebrow to humor her. “Like what?”

Bunny’s grim amber eyes bored into his. “Never come back here.”

Dingo blinked several times and frowned, his eyes clouding with confusion. “What? Why not?”

Bunny stared back at him without once blinking, her shadowed face eerily dark. “This place...there’s something wrong with it. Something very wrong. Everything about this place screams nothing but pain and death. Please...Don’t come back.”

Dingo’s eyes widened. In shock, he stared down at her for a long heartbeat of silence, then managed a weak smile and let out an uncertain chuckle. “Don’t be silly, Bunny. It’s just a valley. Nothing dangerous about it. I mean, yeah, the woods around it are a little weird, but...”

“I’m serious,” Bunny snarled, her normally high-pitched voice dropping to a low, guttural growl that seemed to belong to someone much older and colder than her. “This place is *not normal*. Something very, very bad happened here. You have to believe me, Dingo. If you come back here...you’ll be sorry.”

Dingo blinked at her in surprise, then managed a faint smile and patted her gently with his paw. “Calm down, Bunny. It’s okay. This trip has been pretty scary and it’s getting late...Your fear and exhaustion are probably just getting to you. It’ll be all right. Let’s just go home.”

Bunny let out a low, furious snarl, her pitch black fur rising up all along her back. “Don’t treat me like a stupid pup!” With flashing amber eyes, she glared up at him in fury, her fangs bared in a guttural growl. “I’m much better than that! You don’t know what I know!” When Dingo took a step back and stared down at her in shock, Bunny gritted her teeth, then let out a grudging sigh and turned away from him. A dark growl rumbled in her throat. “Never mind,” she muttered, her low voice calmer but darker. “Do what you want.” She heaved a long, bitter sigh. “Let’s just get back home.”

“Okay...” With a tense, unnerved frown, Dingo eyed her with wary brown eyes and gave her a cautious tap on her shoulder. “Just try to relax, Bunny. You’re so tense all of a sudden.”

“Yeah, I wonder why.” Curling her lip in disgust, Bunny turned around and stalked toward the dark woods, her short tail lashing tensely back and forth. She didn’t look back at him. “Come on, Leader Dingo. Let’s get moving. We’ve got things to do.”

Frowning, Dingo eyed her with a cautious look, then just shrugged and turned to follow her. The instant he fell into step behind her, she looked back over her shoulder to meet his gaze with a dark scowl. An eerie, dangerous gleam flashed in her dark amber eyes. “Just try to keep my warning in mind.”

Chapter Fifteen

Sincerity

Cold, malevolent eyes bored into Saderia's skin, setting her fur on fire with fear and discomfort. With a gasp, Saderia opened her eyes into sheer darkness and froze, feeling her heart skip with dread. In a flash, a clap of thunder rumbled in the sky and a flash of lightning split through the darkness right in front of her. Blinded by bright yellow light, Saderia gasped and squeezed her eyes shut. When she forced them open again, her heart skipped with fear.

A wide stone hollow carved right into the dirt opened up before her. Craggy ridges spiraled down deep into the low center of the crater, each edged with hard, sharp rocks. Huge stone spikes jutted up from the very base of the hollow, glinting in the moonlight. Saderia's eyes widened in horror. Before she could do a thing, the ground suddenly gave out beneath her paws. A shrill scream tore out of her throat. Twisting and thrashing wildly through the air, she flew toward the piercing spikes in a rush, her heart hammering in her chest. Right before the treacherous spikes tore into her skin, she squeezed her eyes shut.

Darkness overwhelmed her the instant she closed her eyes. A low, eerie voice whispered through the shadows around her. "*This place screams nothing but pain and death...*"

With a gasp, Saderia forced her eyes open and let out a shrill scream. Nothing but darkness filled the tense air surrounding her. Shadows whisked around her everywhere she looked. Eerie, shimmering red eyes flashed through the darkness, their glowing depths alight with malice. Soft, sinister laughter and whispers echoed through the air, ringing in her ears. All at once, the shadows whispered in her ear with one wild, evil laugh.

"Beware an old enemy, Daughter. Beware...."

Saderia's eyes flew open. With a wild gasp, she jolted upward in bed, her fur bristling and her heart pounding with fear. Her breath caught in

her throat. Slowly, her dark, shadowy room flickered into view, chasing away the visions in her head, but her heart didn't slow. Memories of the eerie nightmare swirled through her mind, making her heart race with fear. Hardly daring to breathe, she whipped around to scan the shadows covering her walls and the dark furniture tensely, searching for any sign of the eerie, glowing red eyes. Nothing leered back at her from the shadows. The entire room was silent.

Slowly, Saderia let out a quiet sigh and slumped back in her bed. Reminding herself over and over again that she was safe and that nothing bad was happening, she forced herself to relax only when she was sure that there was nothing lurking in the blackness of the night. With a bitter frown, she leaned back on her pillow and narrowed her eyes, thinking back to the night before and all the crazy things that had happened. Dash and Dingo's fight...crashing through those dark, terrifying woods...finding that strange valley...The memories swirled through Saderia's mind.

After carrying Tawny and leading Bunny back through the thick woods, Saderia had finally managed to stumble back to civilization. By that point, she had found it difficult to even lift a paw, so sore and exhausted from navigating the woods. Everyone had been beyond tired. Tawny had ended up falling asleep dangling from Saderia's jaws. Despite being unable to keep her eyes open by the time they broke out of the woods, Bunny had still adamantly refused to be carried.

As soon as they had broken out of the woods, Saderia had led them all to the Home of the Leopards where Loki and Maeta had been waiting after giving up their own hopeless search. The leopard leader had been beyond relieved when she had taken Tawny from Saderia and thanked her for her troubles. Rip, Tear, and Lightning had been waiting in the dusty clearing, as well. Leading Bunny along with him, Dingo had met up with them, said goodbye to Saderia, Dash, and Jeb, then bounded away with his companions to return to the desert.

While the dingoes had raced to the border and the leopards had returned to their homes to sleep, Saderia, Dash, and Jeb had tiredly stumbled back to their own homes. At that point, they had been so exhausted that Saderia was stunned they had actually managed to find their way back. After saying goodbye to Jeb and leaving him to find his way to his own house, Saderia and Dash had crashed through the door of theirs and

collapsed. Karenisha and Makero had found them slumped on the ground and asked them where they had found the two young animals, but Saderia had been too tired to answer. Vaguely, she remembered her parents helping her and Dash stumble to their rooms. Everything afterward was a blur.

Shaking herself out of her thoughts, Saderia looked up at the darkened window on the other side of her room and felt her heart skip with dismay. A tiny hint of silver moonlight glowed outside, leaving the woods beyond her home covered in shadows. The morning sun didn't seem anywhere even close to rising. She couldn't have been sleeping for more than an hour or so.

With a low groan, she closed her eyes and slumped back against the bed even though she already knew she wouldn't be able to fall back asleep. Even if she could, it probably wouldn't last. Another nightmare or Dream or vision or whatever would just wake her up again.

Rolling onto her side, Saderia flicked on the lamp on her bedside table and winced at the sudden yellow glow of light. With a long, heavy sigh, she leaned back against her pillow and stared up at the dark ceiling, trying not to let the eerie shadows flitting across it scare her. As she lay there in silence, she found herself thinking about the strange valley she had discovered. Curiosity burned in her heart at the thought of it. Now that she wasn't actually there, it almost seemed like it didn't—couldn't—really exist. It seemed like she had merely dreamed about the strange place. She hadn't known such beautiful valleys existed in the forest.

Her mind whirled with memories of the roaring waterfall, the slick rocks on the side of the cliff, the wild grasses rustling below, the strange crumbling stones, and the huge ridges protecting the valley. With a flash of excitement, she wondered if she and her friends were the first to discover the incredible glade. Most of the forest was lined with worn paths and covered with much tamer grass—signs of being lived in and traveled frequently—but the valley was something entirely different. Everything seemed peaceful and undisturbed. Saderia's eyes shone with wonder. The forest was vast, and it wasn't that implausible to think there might still be places no one knew about. Her heart began to beat faster with excitement. Perhaps she had truly discovered a whole new place just like she had with Dingo's desert and Jeb's forest...only a little closer to home.

Her paws suddenly itched with the desire to return to the valley and check it out, though the thought of having to travel through the dense woods to get there was a bit...less than appealing. Even so, she felt her heart beat faster with excitement. Her tail flicked wildly back and forth as she imagined exploring it, but almost as soon as the thought crossed her mind, she made herself push it away. It was too dangerous to go on her own, and she doubted her friends would want to go. Not when everyone was still acting so hostile toward each other...

The instant the realization crossed her mind, her thoughts turned to the fight Dash and Dingo had started in the woods. Feeling her claws unsheathe in a flash of bitterness and dismay, she fought to bite back a sigh. Why did things have to change so dramatically? Dash and Dingo had taunted each other in the past, but they had never fought like that. If someone had once tried to tell her that the two of them would actually leap into battle to hurt each other, she would have never believed them. Now it was reality.

With a heavy heart, she buried her face in her pillow and bit back a sigh. For a long moment, she lay still without moving or lifting her head, too lost in her thoughts to care about the eerie darkness surrounding her. Just when she started to fear she might fall asleep, the low creak of the door opening suddenly moaned through the night and a soft, hesitant voice whispered her name. "Saderia? Are you awake?"

Saderia's head shot up in alarm. With a gasp, she whipped around to face the doorway and blinked in surprise.

The instant her eyes landed on him, Dash froze in the open doorway, his amber irises flashing with panic. With wide eyes, he stared up at her nervously, hardly daring to move. To Saderia's surprise, he actually looked worse than he had before he had gone to bed. Even darker circles hung under his bloodshot eyes, and his messy dark brown mane stuck up in wild, untamed clumps all over his face. His tail flicked nervously back and forth and a tense aura of fear and unease clouded his dull amber eyes. Hardly daring to breathe, he stared up at her warily, his fur bristling with uncertainty.

Saderia blinked several times, then frowned and slowly pulled herself up into a sitting position to face him. "Dash? What are you doing up?"

“I...I was sleeping, but then I had a nightmare...” Blinking out of his nervous haze, Dash slowly looked down and shuffled his paws, his eyes dark with nervousness and sorrow. “I...I guess the same probably happened to you.” He paused, then cautiously looked up, his eyes dull and hollow. “If you’re not going to go back to sleep...can I talk to you? Just for a minute?”

Saderia let out a long sigh and patted the spot beside her, too tired to care about arguing with Dash. “Sure. I’m not getting back to sleep anytime soon.”

Dash let out a long breath and simply nodded. Keeping his eyes locked on his paws, he padded wearily toward her bed and leapt up to sit on the rumpled blanket beside her. For a long moment of silence, he stared at the ground with dark, narrowed eyes. After a tense heartbeat of quiet, he took a shaky breath and finally raised his voice to a soft, tired whisper. “I’m sorry about what happened, Saderia.” Before she could respond, he held up a paw to stop her. “Wait. Before you say anything...just let me say this. I... I’ve been up for more than an hour thinking about this, and it’s just driving me insane. Please just let me say this, and then if you still hate me...” He trailed off with a nervous glance at her out of the corner of his eye.

Saderia frowned and eyed him closely for a tense moment of silence, then just nodded. “All right,” she murmured. “Go ahead.”

Dash let out a soft sigh and took a shaky breath. Slowly, he looked down at his paws, his eyes clouding with pain and regret. “All right. I...I’m really sorry for what I did today, Saderia. I really am. I don’t know what came over me. I don’t know why I fought with Dingo. And I know you probably don’t believe me, but I really am sorry for what I did. I shouldn’t have just left you and Jeb to go off through the woods on your own while I fought with Dingo. That wasn’t right either.”

Slowly, he shook his head and gritted his teeth, his eyes flashing with pain and his claws digging into her tattered blanket. “I just can’t do this anymore, Saderia. I mean...if someone had told me a few months ago that one day we would hate each other, I wouldn’t have believed them. But now it’s actually happening. I don’t know what happened to make me like this, Saderia. I mean, I’m sure Dastarius did do something to my mind to fit his plans, but I can’t just blame him anymore...I’m the one who listened to him, after all.” He winced and looked down, hiding his eyes. “I didn’t want to admit that it was my fault for listening to Dastarius, but it’s been

bothering me for a long time. I don't know what was wrong with me that made me decide to listen to him. I think I really was just trying to do what was best for you and the others because I thought Dastarius could warn me about something dangerous, but either way, I shouldn't have done it. I should have trusted you more."

Saderia blinked in surprise and stared at him with wide eyes.

Barely noticing her stunned gaze, Dash gazed bitterly down at his paws and scowled, his eyes dark with regret. "I tried not to think about all this stuff after it all ended at the final battle. I wanted to hope that you would just like me again, and I tried not to think about these things. I just covered them up with hatred so I wouldn't have to think about them, but now that I realize that, it just makes me sick. I don't even feel like me anymore. I don't know what happened to me. A few months ago, I was grateful just to be your friend. Now I feel like I *deserve* it. I don't know how that happened. I guess you and your family have just been too nice to me, and I've just been with you so long that I can't imagine anything different."

He let out a long, weary sigh. "And now, now that everything's come out about my visits with Dastarius, I've been telling myself that the only thing I want is for that to have never happened. But that's pointless and impossible. I've also told myself that I just want you to forgive me and like me again. But that's not what I want either. Not really. What I want is to be me again. What I want is for us to work through this and move past this. I want for us to show each other that we will protect each other like we used to, that we can trust each other again. I don't want some big scene where you say you forgive me and—*poof!*—we're best friends again. I want to be able to prove to both of us that I won't do this again. I don't want to fight for no reason. I want to be proud of the fact that I'll only fight for my friends. I don't want to hate Dingo. I don't want to resent Jeb and Loki for sitting by you in school. I don't want to be the bad guy anymore. And I don't want to be better than them. I want us all to be equal again so that we can all just get along and help each other out, like on our journeys. I don't want to have to wonder whether you'll believe me when I apologize. I don't want to do anything to have to apologize for."

Dash took a deep breath and slowly raised his head to look at Saderia, his eyes shimmering with regret. "I know what I did was wrong—

all of it. And I know that I've just been making it worse since the war ended. But I just...I don't want this to keep getting worse. I'm sorry, Saderia. Is there any way you could even try to forgive me...and we could try to be friends again?"

Saderia blinked in surprise, then narrowed her eyes with a wary frown. Without a word, she studied him closely, trying to see if he was sincere or not. To her surprise, when she looked deep into his eyes, it truly seemed like he was. For the first time, she found it easy to believe his words and trust that he meant what he said...the way she had trusted the old Dash. Her heart fluttered with hope, but a dark sense of doubt and unease still lingered in the back of her mind. Slowly, she narrowed her eyes and studied Dash with a cautious frown. "When I go to visit Dingo next Saturday, will you come with me? And apologize to Dingo?"

Dash took a deep breath and let it out in a slow sigh. "Yes...I will."

Saderia frowned and studied him for a long moment. When she read the sincerity in his eyes, her heart leapt with hope. Without even realizing it, she felt a weak, weary smile cross her face. "Good...I think I can forgive you then."

"Okay, but...wait..." Wincing, Dash made himself look up at her, his eyes dark with pain and misery and his shoulders suddenly tense with discomfort. "Before you forgive me...there...there are some other things I need to tell you...When I told you about Dastarius and all that...I didn't tell you everything."

Saderia blinked in surprise, then darkly narrowed her eyes, a tense frown creeping across her face. "What do you mean?"

Dash took a deep breath and slowly let it out, lowering his eyes to the ground. "There are some things I did when I was living with Rock...things that I didn't want anyone—especially you—to ever know about. I still don't want to talk about it. I did some...really, really horrible things to Dingo...and Karenisha."

While Saderia studied him with grim, dark eyes, Dash took a deep breath and gazed down at the ground, never looking up to meet her eyes. In a voice softer than a whisper and more strangled than a gasp, he slowly began to describe everything he had done as Rock's Second in Command. Fighting to keep his voice steady, he described how Rock had ordered him to torture Dingo in his makeshift prison—in the room just at the other end

of the hallway—as well as how he had agreed to do the same for Karenisha when Rock had called for volunteers.

“I...I think that’s it,” Dash choked out when he finally finished speaking, his paws trembling and his eyes distant and bloodshot. A haunted look shadowed his face, making him seem lost in his own bloody memories. Slowly, he shook his head. “I...I know this is probably selfish, considering I did much worse to them...but what I did has really...really disturbed me. I’ve been trying my hardest not to think about it recently because I didn’t want to think about it.”

Saderia didn’t say a word. For a long moment, she stared down at her paws without speaking, her eyes growing dark and clouded as everything Dash had told her slowly sank in. Side by side, she and Dash stared down at the ground without once looking at each other, lost in their own dark thoughts. Silence spread out between them, thicker than ever and tinged with regret. The quiet seemed to last forever.

After what felt like ages, Dash let out a shaky breath and looked away, his eyes clouding with pain. “I’m sorry, Saderia...If you want me to leave...”

“You don’t have to leave.” With dark amber eyes as haunted and distant as his, Saderia stared absently down at the floor, her heart so heavy it seemed to weigh down on her chest. Slowly, she shook her head, her faraway gaze tinged with pain. “I...I just...I don’t understand. I mean...I guess I can kind of understand why you did what you did to Dingo...Rock ordered you to do it, and if you hadn’t...he probably would have killed you both. But with mom...” Slowly, she raised her head to look up at him, her wide amber gaze meeting his. Pain glimmered in her eyes and her voice cracked with misery. “Why would you *volunteer* to do something like that?”

“Because Rock would almost certainly have made me do it even if I hadn’t,” Dash whispered, his voice soft and subdued. With a shaky breath, he forced himself to look up at Saderia, his eyes sad and distant. “And on the off chance that he didn’t order me to do it...he would have made one of his other followers do it. Which would have been worse, Saderia?”

Saderia winced and looked away, her eyes darkening with pain and understanding. “I guess you’re right...” Even as she spoke, she struggled to suppress a shudder. He had a point. Dash would at least have the mercy to

go easy on Karenisha—or at least as much as he could with Rock watching. If one of Rock's cruel, bloodthirsty followers had gotten his paws on her instead...Karenisha would have been even worse off. Maybe even dead. A shiver raced down her spine and her eyes clouded with pain. "That would have been worse..."

Dash just lowered his head and looked away. Silence spread out between them. For a long moment, both of them merely stared down at their paws with dark, haunted eyes, never once daring to say a word. After a tense heartbeat of silence, Saderia cracked a wry, bitter grin and let out a soft, humorless chuckle. When Dash looked up at her in surprise, she just shook her head, her gaze brimming with sadness and regret.

"Things sure have changed," she whispered with a wry, miserable smile.

Dash let out a long sigh and slowly looked down. "They sure have."

Saderia let out a quiet breath and gazed down at the ground, her expression darkening with sudden tension and pain. "Does Mom...?"

"She doesn't remember." Already knowing what Saderia wanted to ask, Dash listlessly shook his head, his eyes locked on his paws. "I think she thinks it wasn't real. She just thinks it was a nightmare."

Saderia winced and nodded slowly, trying to bite back a sigh. "But Dingo..."

"He remembers." Dash's eyes flashed and he simply shook his head. "He just doesn't care enough to be mad about it."

Saderia let out a quiet sigh and lowered her head. "Did this happen...to anyone else?"

Dash shrugged lifelessly, his eyes dark and lost in thought. "I sent Lily to the prison during an attack on her neighborhood, but I didn't do anything worse than that to her or anyone else, as far as I remember."

Silence.

After what felt like years of nothing but tense, thick quiet, Saderia just closed her eyes and slowly shook her head, her voice barely louder than a whisper. "I don't know if I would have been able to do the things you did if I had been in your position, Dash. But...I...I think I can still forgive you. I don't think I'd ever be able to do what you did, even knowing what was at stake...but that probably just means you're stronger than me."

Dash shook his head and narrowed his eyes with a dull frown. “Morals don’t make you weak, Saderia. After all that you’ve gone through...you’re much stronger than I am. Besides...that’s what I would have thought, too, if our positions had been reversed. It’s different...when you’re there. When lives are on the line. When *everything* is at stake.”

“Maybe you’re right.” Saderia paused for a long moment, then took a deep breath and managed to look up at him with a weak, sad smile. “This is all...unbelievably difficult to even think about, but...they say it always gets worse before it gets better, right?”

Dash blinked in surprise, then slowly looked up and managed to squeeze up a weak smile. “Yeah...I guess so.”

Saderia let out a quiet breath and rested her paw gently on his. “We should try to get back to the way we were before all this. I actually felt kind of normal a few hours ago when we found that weird valley in the woods. It was like we were friends again, on another adventure.” She paused, then narrowed her eyes in a wondering frown. “I was thinking...maybe we could go back there to check it out. Would you want to come with me?”

Dash blinked, then slowly smiled back at her and nodded. “Of course. Do you want to just go together, or should we try to get Jeb to come, too?” He paused, then narrowed his eyes and cautiously flicked his tail. “If you want Dingo to come, too, we could try going to the desert to ask him, but I doubt he’d want to. Me and the forest are probably what he hates most at the moment.”

Saderia managed a soft chuckle. “No, that’s fine. I doubt Dingo would want to come either. How about we talk to Jeb after school today to see if he wants to come with us, and then we can just go straight there from school to explore? We can tell Mom and Dad we’re going to explore the forest before we leave for school so they don’t worry when we don’t return until later on.”

Dash smiled a bright, hopeful smile. “Yeah, that sounds great. It’ll be just like old times...” Trailing off, he paused and gazed around at the dark bedroom, then turned to look back at her with a weak smile. “I guess if we’re planning on setting out on an adventure, we had better get some sleep, though.”

Saderia just shrugged and sighed. “I’m not going back to sleep. I’ll just wake up again more tired than before.”

“Oh.” Dash paused uncertainly, then gave her a cautious look. “Do you want to just stay up and talk then? I doubt I’ll be able to sleep either.”

Saderia managed a warm, hopeful smile and nodded. “Yeah. That sounds great, actually.”

The day passed by in a blur of activity. Feeling excited for the first time in ages, Saderia rushed through the day as fast as she could, determined to get to the valley as soon as possible. In the morning, she told her parents about her plans to explore later on and felt relieved when they instantly agreed. After that, she raced to school with Dash close beside her, eager to get through with it. Along the way, the two of them met up with Jeb and explained their plans to him on the walk to school. When they asked him if he would go with them, he told them he would think about it and let them know later. It only made Saderia even more anxious to breeze through the day.

The school day was nothing but a daze. Apart from talking to Loki about Tawny’s disappearance at school, the rest of it seemed wildly boring compared to her plans for the end of the day. It didn’t help that after spending an entire night without sleeping, Saderia was exhausted. It took a lot to keep from falling asleep at her desk, but she forced herself to stay awake and tried to ignore her exhaustion, knowing there was nothing she could do about it.

At the end of the school day, Saderia practically flew out through the double doors and soared down the short flight of steps. Feeling her heart race with excitement, she bounded out into the wide clearing in front of the school, barely noticing the wild chatter of the students around her. When Dash and Jeb finally caught up to her, she whipped around to face her two friends and met Jeb’s wide blue and green eyes with shining amber irises, her heart skipping with hope.

“So what do you say?” she asked, facing Jeb with a hopeful smile. “Will you come with us?”

Jeb blinked in surprise, then managed a weak, hopeful smile. “All right. I’ll go with you.” He paused, then narrowed his eyes in a more uncertain frown. “You do know how to get there again, right?”

Saderia shrugged. “I have a, uh, pretty good idea. I know which way to go, and I’m pretty sure that once you find those dark woods, you just

have to run straight through them to reach that pool of water and then just follow the river.”

Jeb hesitated uncertainly for a heartbeat of silence, then just shrugged and smiled. “Well, all right. Are we going right now?”

Saderia grinned. “Yep. Let’s get going!” Without another word, she turned to lead the way toward the dirt path leading away from school into the town closest to her house. While she sped away, her friends chased after her at once, shouting for her to slow down in bright, playful voices. An eager smile crossed her face. For the first time in what felt like ages, she actually felt like herself again.

On the way to the dense woods leading to the valley, Saderia had expected the thick forest to be much less daunting during the day than it had been in the night. When she reached the woods, though, she realized she had made a serious miscalculation. With each step she took deeper into the vast, enclosing forest, it only grew darker and darker. Only a few small pinpricks of sunlight filtered in through tiny holes in the thick canopy overhead, leaving the dense woods covered in darkness. The deeper into the woods she moved, the darker it got.

Gritting her teeth, Saderia tried to shake off her fear and pushed deeper into the dense woods. All around her, the grass grew wilder and wilder until it tickled her belly, and the trees grew closer and closer together. Determined not to give up, Saderia stumbled clumsily through the enormous pines and oaks, gesturing for her two struggling friends to keep moving. “Come on, guys!” she called, narrowing her eyes and forcing her way into the worst part of the woods. “Once we get through this, we’ll be halfway there. It’s not that hard.”

Behind her, Dash and Jeb made themselves nod and tensely stumbled after her, struggling to weave around the dense trees. Without looking back, Saderia darted onward, leaping through the gaps in the trees and weaving through the thick, overgrown grass as fast as she could. Instead of rushing like the last time when she had had to keep up with Bunny, she tried to keep up a more steady pace, not wanting to exhaust herself. As she leapt through the maze of tall, gnarled trees with her friends close behind her, she felt a faint smile creep across her face. Even though the old, dead trees around her still unnerved her, she felt proud of herself for

being brave enough to face the woods. Shaking the thoughts from her head, she dove deeper into the forest, determined to make it through.

After what felt like an eternity, she finally stumbled out past a copse of thick trees on the edge of the woods into a wide, peaceful clearing. Her eyes opened wide. With a soft gasp, she stumbled to a stop just outside the woods and lifted her head to look around, taking in deep gulps of air to catch her breath. Behind her, Dash and Jeb staggered out of the thick woods with a wild crashing sound and stumbled to stand beside her, their breath heaving out in wild, erratic pants. Side by side, the three of them turned to gaze around at the clearing with wide, amazed eyes.

Sunlight shimmered down through the wide gap in the canopy hanging over the clearing. Bright golden light dappled the sparkling blue pool of water in the center of the glade and flickered across the lapping river flowing off into the dark woods on the right. Looking even more beautiful in the daylight, the rocky ridges seemed to rise up around the back edge of the pool of water even higher than before. The strange rectangular stone propped up on the center ridge at the back of the pond seemed to shimmer in the sunlight.

Saderia's eyes instantly snapped to the odd stone and gleamed with curiosity. Before she knew what she was doing, she looked back at her friends and flicked her tail toward the lake. "Do you guys mind waiting a minute? I want to check this out."

When Dash and Jeb just shrugged and sat back on the grass to wait, Saderia hastily turned and bounded toward the wide lake, her eyes shimmering with excitement and wonder. Without hesitating, she gingerly placed her paw into the cool water. Ignoring the shock of cold, she carefully slipped down into the water to wade through the shallow pool. With a shiver, she stepped out into the very middle of the lake, feeling the water lap around her legs. The icy cool water rose up all the way to her belly, but she ignored its frigid touch.

Splashing through the pool, she paused when she reached the back of the lake where several small, rocky ridges rose up above the water and connected to the grassy land sloping down around the deep pool. Covered in wild grass and blooming flowers, the rocky ridges seemed to slope down like tiny stone steps into the water below. On the left and right, all the ledges seemed to run together into one and curve around the side of the

pool to follow the river. At the back of the pond, the ridges were wider and larger.

On one of the middle ridges standing above the pool of water but not quite reaching up to the top where the ridges met the land was a large, almost perfectly cut rectangular stone. Cracked and crumbled with age, it jutted up from the ridge, standing proudly upright. When Saderia pressed a paw against it, it felt cool to the touch and incredibly smooth apart from a few cracks due to the weathering of time. Drawing her paw back, she examined the stone closely, her eyes shining with wonder. Several strange, faded marks seemed to have been carved across the smooth, perfect stone. Up close, they looked almost like letters, but they didn't spell out anything she could read or understand.

"Guys, look at this," Saderia called, flicking her tail but not bothering to look back at her friends. Her eyes remained locked on the stone, intently studying the strange, illegible letters.

Hearing a few quick paw steps somewhere above her, Saderia looked up from the pool of water just in time to see Dash and Jeb skid to a stop on the edge of the top ridge winding around the pool. With curious amber and blue/green eyes, her two friends peered over the edge of the pond and studied the stone wonderingly, their faces confused and inquisitive.

Saderia gestured to the strange markings on the stone with shining amber eyes. "Doesn't it look like it's meant to say something?"

"Yeah, kind of," Dash replied, tipping his head to the side to get a better look. His eyes shimmered with wonder. "But what exactly does it say?"

Saderia let out a reluctant sigh and glanced back at the stone. "That's what I can't figure out. But it really looks like something was inscribed on here somehow..." Her mind whirled with curiosity. "Someone must have found this place to write something here, but...from the looks of this stone, it must have been a *really* long time ago."

"Weird," Jeb murmured, his eyes narrowing with bewilderment. "I wonder what it says."

"Me too." For a long moment, Saderia studied the stone with dark, curious eyes, then simply sighed and shook the thoughts out of her head, knowing she wouldn't find the answer. With a quiet breath, she tore her

eyes off the stone and hastily leapt out of the pool onto the ledge beside her friends, shaking droplets of water off her soaked legs. “Oh well. I guess we should just forget about it for now. I don’t think there’s any way to decipher what it says.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. We should probably keep going.” Dash paused, then glanced at the dense, shadowy woods to the right of the pool and sighed, his ears drooping with anxiety. “One more patch of woods to get through...”

Saderia rested her tail lightly on his shoulder and managed a faint smile. “It’ll be fine. Just listen for the river to guide you.” When Dash and Jeb just nodded, Saderia grinned and whipped around to bound toward the dark woods and lead the way to the valley. A second before she plunged into the shadows, her eyes lit up with a bright, excited glow that even the darkness couldn’t extinguish.

The thunderous roaring of the waterfall boomed in Saderia’s ears a second before she saw it. With a shaky gasp, she stumbled out through a dense clump of undergrowth with Dash and Jeb close behind her, throwing leaves up into the air. Gasping for breath, she staggered out on the grassy edge of the cliff, her sides heaving and her paws aching with exhaustion. Letting out a gasp of shock, Saderia staggered to a clumsy halt and sharply lifted her head to look up. Her breath caught in her throat.

The valley was even more incredible in the daylight. Sunlight shimmered down through the dense canopy of leaves and illuminated the rushing waterfall roaring just in front of her. White mist and spray seemed to sparkle in the bright afternoon light at the very top and bottom of the waterfall, making it look even more majestic than before. Past the roaring waterfall, the valley was beautiful. The dense, dark woods crowding around the valley on the topmost ridge formed a thick, protective canopy around the very edges of the valley. An enormous gap broke through the thick spattering of leaves right over the glade, sending beams of golden sunlight shimmering down into the valley. The bright light seemed to turn the flowing waters of the waterfall to liquid gold.

Deep ripples lapped through the tiny pool at the very base of the golden waterfall. Around the pond, the wild light green grass glimmered with dew and the spray from the rushing water. Sunlight dappled the wet,

algae-covered rocks jutting out from the side of the cliff on either side of the waterfall, dyeing them a whitish-yellow hue. The huge rock and surrounding stones resting a few feet away from the pond glinted brownish-gold in the soft light. Every enormous tree towering around the valley and the humungous ridges lining the edges of the glade were splattered with dozens of different shades of green and other natural colors that seemed to glow in the sunlight. Amazement shone in Saderia's eyes.

"This place is so cool," she whispered, never tearing her eyes off the clearing. Beside her, Dash and Jeb nodded in amazement without looking away from the huge valley, their eyes wide with shock and awe.

Blinking several times, Dash gazed down at the vast clearing in wonder, then slowly looked up at his friends with bright, shining amber eyes. "Want to go down?" When Saderia looked up and nodded with an eager grin, he just smiled and gestured to the jutting stones leading down the side of the cliff. "All right. Just be careful. I'll go first."

Giving her one last smile, he turned to look back down at the rocks and bunched his muscles. In a flash, he leapt off the side of the cliff and flew down to the first jutting stone in a streak of dark brown fur. The instant his paws touched the smooth rock, he lunged down to the stones below him. As fast as he could, he lunged from boulder to boulder, spiraling down lower and lower until he leapt off the final stone. Instantly, he flew off the last stone at the bottom of the cliff and landed nimbly on the wild grass at the bottom of the clearing. Catching himself easily, he turned and looked back up at the top of the cliff to wait for them, his eyes shining with excitement.

Smiling, Saderia cast a quick glance at the slippery rocks, then turned back to face Jeb with a faint gleam of worry in her eyes. "What about you, Jeb? Can you make it down, too? It's a little difficult, but I think you'll be fine."

Jeb hesitated, then managed a weak, uneasy nod. "Sure, I'll...I'll try." With a nervous frown, he stepped up to the edge of the cliff and nervously eyed the jutting rocks, then took a deep, shaky breath. In a surprisingly agile flash of movement, he jumped down to the first rock and nimbly leapt off it to the one below. With fearfully bristling fur, the tiny creature leapt from stone to stone as fast as he could, his webbed feet seeming to glide right over the spray wetting the rocks. As if getting the

hang of it, he managed a faint smile when he leapt down to the last rock, but it didn't last long.

The instant his paws touched the last stone, they slipped across the slick boulder. Jeb's eyes opened wide. With a shrill shriek of fear, he slipped right off the edge of the rock and flew through the air toward the valley. Saderia's heart skipped with alarm. With a stunned gasp, she lurched toward the edge of the cliff, then froze. Before Jeb could crash to the ground, Dash leapt up and caught his fall. In a flash, Jeb smacked into him with a shrill yelp, sending them both tumbling to the ground but breaking both of their falls. Letting out low groans, the two rolled across the wild, overgrown grass until they tumbled to a stop a few paces away from each other, their fur rustled and stained with damp blades of grass.

While Dash winced and pulled himself to his paws, Jeb let out a nervous squeak and hastily leapt up to stand, dusting off his fur. His ears flattened back with embarrassment. "Er...sorry," he squeaked with a sheepish shrug of his shoulders.

With a faint smile, Dash just shrugged and flicked his tail to brush it off.

Biting back a sigh, Saderia slowly relaxed, relieved that neither of them had been hurt. Taking a deep breath, she slowly stepped up to the edge, knowing it was her turn to join them. With a soft sigh, she pushed her fears to the back of her mind and forced herself to leap off the edge of the cliff before she could chicken out. Air rushed past her fur and a flash of fear shot through her, but she ignored it. As fast as she could, she landed clumsily on the first stone and turned to leap down to the next one. Without stopping to catch her balance, she leapt from stone to stone alongside the roaring waterfall. When she finally reached the bottom stone jutting out just a few feet above the grass, she took a deep breath and leapt off the end of it. In a flash that lasted barely a second, she soared through the air, then landed heavily in a patch of thick, soft grass.

Her eyes opened wide. The instant her paws touched the ground, a sudden electric jolt of shock flashed through her entire body, setting her blood on fire and raising every hair on her back. Her breath caught in her throat. As soon as the feeling had shot through her, it faded away, but a strange sensation lingered in her mind. As unidentifiable as it was sudden, the feeling was nothing she could explain. It wasn't fear or shock or pain.

All it was was a strange, unfamiliar sensation that made her pause, as if her instinct was trying to tell her something she couldn't understand.

Blinking in surprise, Saderia hesitated for half a second, then just shook her head in bewilderment, pushing the feeling to the back of her mind. Shaking off her thoughts, she looked up to find her friends and almost giggled when she saw them. Just in front of her, Dash and Jeb stood side by side in the mess of thick, overgrown grass covering the clearing. While the grass tickled Dash's belly, it completely enveloped Jeb, hiding his tiny yellow body beneath a clump of undergrowth and making it hard to see him. The tiny creature had to struggle to see over the tall stalks before Dash kindly pressed a paw down to flatten the grass around him, giving him room to see.

Saderia's whiskers twitched in amusement, but her eyes shone with curiosity. "Come on, let's explore this place!" In a flash, she bounded through the thick, damp grass as fast as she could, her tail flicking with excitement. Hastily, Dash and Jeb fell into step behind her.

With difficulty, Saderia struggled to walk through the sea of grass, flattening it as best as she could and having to fight to get through it. Some stalks of grass grew so high they even towered over her own head. Fighting through the dense stalks, she lifted her head high to look out over the wild grass and instantly started to move faster. As quickly as she could, she forged a clumsy path through the grass to the huge gray stone towering a few paces away from the base of the waterfall. As soon as she got close to the stone, she bunched her muscles and leapt up as high as she could. On clumsy paws, she landed heavily on top of the flat, smooth stone and stumbled to stand at the very edge of the slanted rock, staring down at the ocean of grass around her. Below her, Dash and Jeb quickly leapt onto two of the smaller, lower stones peeking up out of the grass in front of the large boulder. Side by side, they looked up at her and held up their paws to wave with wide, friendly grins.

"How's the weather up there?" Dash called, looking up and pretending to shield his eyes against the sun.

Saderia giggled and rolled her eyes. "Pretty good!" With shining amber eyes, she turned around on top of the flat stone to examine the valley from her new vantage point. Her breath caught in wonderment as she gazed out at the amazing sight.

Thick, soft grass covered the entire valley all around her, rustling in a soft breeze. Soft spray from the roaring waterfall floated through the damp, golden air and created a thick, glowing mist just above the wide pool a few feet away from her. The wide, incredible valley around her seemed like a whole new world, turned gold by the sun and filled with the bright sound of rushing water. Her eyes almost instantly rose up to the ridges all around her and glimmered with amazement.

Like enormous, ancient stone steps taken over by wildlife over time, the huge ridges raced all along the edges of the valley, rising higher and higher until they met with the cliff at the top of the waterfall that towered far, far over her head. Each stony ledge that rose up around her was covered in wild brilliant green grass and thick undergrowth, making each level seem fuzzy with foliage. The wall of rock rising up to the very first ridge at the back of the valley stood just a few paces away from the towering rock she stood on. Thicker, denser undergrowth and even taller grass rose up along the rocky wall, nearly hiding it from sight and protecting its secrets.

Saderia's whiskers twitched and her eyes shone with curiosity. In a flash, she leapt off the smooth gray stone and sank deep into the wild grass. Without stopping, she instantly waded through the thick stalks, heading toward the hidden rock wall rising up to the first ledge around the clearing.

Dash and Jeb looked up and instantly leapt after her to follow her when they saw her dart away. "Where are you going?" Dash called, his eyes shining in the sunlight.

"I'm going to explore the ridges!" Saderia called back. As fast as she could, she bounded through the thick grass toward the ridges, leaving her friends struggling to catch up. In a flash, she dove into the thick of the wild, bushy undergrowth rising up in front of the tall rock wall of the first ledge. Trying not to wince when thorns pricked at her sides as she pushed past the branches of the thick bushes around her, she wriggled forcefully through the dense undergrowth protecting the rocky hills. Quickly, she staggered through the thicket of bushes and froze when she stumbled out on the other side. At once, she lifted her head to look up and let out a gasp of surprise.

A wide hole was carved into the side of the rocky wall in front of her, leading into a dark, shadowy cave. Hidden behind the undergrowth, the cave hadn't been visible before, but its entrance was even larger than she

was. Cool, gray stone lined the inside of the cave as far as she could see, while the rest of it disappeared into shadows. Her eyes shone with amazement.

“Guys, come check this out!” With shining amber eyes, she hesitated in the entrance to the cave for only a second, then ducked her head and stepped into the shadowy tunnel.

Blinking to adjust to the darkness, Saderia cautiously slipped past the entrance and stepped out into a long, winding passageway lined with dark stone walls. With wide eyes, she silently padded along the stony passageway, scanning the area around her in wonder. When she looked closely at the walls she passed by, she could just see rough, tiny pictures and faded letters carved all across the stone. As faded and unintelligible as the letters inscribed on the rectangular stone in the first pool of water, the words were impossible to make out, but they captured her curiosity nonetheless. Hardly daring to breathe, she crept deeper and deeper into the cave. With every step she took into the damp, stony passageway, the tunnel around her grew darker and darker, but she didn’t turn back.

Telling herself not to be afraid, Saderia paced deeper into the cave and paused when the stony passageway split off into two different passages leading to the left and right. For only a single heartbeat, she hesitated, then turned and ducked into the right passageway. Keeping her eyes open wide so as not to miss a thing, she carefully crept down the narrow stone corridor, her heart beating faster with wonder. After several minutes of wandering through the darkness, she stepped out of the passageway into a slightly wider stone ‘room’ covered in shadows. When her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she could just make out the room around her.

Several small gray stones sat in a rough circle around the middle of the small room, each one tall enough to reach up to her belly. With wide, wondering eyes, Saderia gazed around at the stones, wondering if they had been used as tables or chairs by some ancient animals. Hardly daring to blink as if afraid she would miss something, she slipped deeper into the room and gingerly pushed on one of the flat, ancient stones. To her surprise, it moved easily across the ground with a low scraping sound, much lighter than it looked. Hidden beneath the light stone were ancient, yellowed pieces of parchment frayed by time. With wide eyes, Saderia carefully picked up the old papers and held them up to read them, but couldn’t. After so much

time, the odd symbols scrawled across the yellowed old parchments had grown too faded to make out. There was virtually no way to read what they said even if they had been written in a language she understood—something she doubted if the odd inscriptions on the walls were any indication.

Biting back a sigh, she laid the papers back down and pushed the stone back into place over the old parchments, not wanting to disturb the odd symmetry of the circle of stones. With one last glance around at the odd ‘room,’ Saderia slowly turned around and slipped back into the passage. Faster than before, she darted down the passageway and instantly slipped into the passage opposite it when she broke out into the main corridor where the path had forked before. Hastily, she bounded through the narrow stone passageway and looked up in excitement when the path finally ended and broke out into a wider room in the heart of the cave.

Her eyes widened in amazement. Every inch of space on the stone walls of the room, the ceiling, and even the craggy rock floor was covered with faded old inscriptions of letters and words she couldn’t read. In wild patterns she couldn’t make out, the indecipherable words and bewildering pictures raced across the walls, the floor, and the ceiling, leaving no bare spaces. Other than the strange letters across the stone, the room was practically empty. A few frayed, rolled up scrolls yellowed and tattered by time lay curled up in the corner of the room. Saderia didn’t dare unfurl them to try to read them, afraid they would disintegrate in her paws and knowing she wouldn’t be able to read them anyway.

Apart from the scrolls, the only other thing in the room was a large, completely flat stone slab pressed up against the back wall. Dozens of ancient, dried up leaves lay scattered across the long, smooth rock. With wide eyes, Saderia cautiously stepped closer to the smooth, leaf-covered stone and studied it carefully. Had it been used as some sort of bed by whatever ancient animals had discovered this place before her? It actually reminded her of the ‘bed’ Dingo had used in his old, secret den back when he had lived as an outcast—only instead of being covered with sand, this one was covered with leaves.

Curiosity glowed in Saderia’s eyes. Unable to push away her wonder, she carefully stepped toward the stone slab and leapt up onto the leafy bed. Slowly, she settled herself down on the old leaves as carefully as she could, ignoring the crunching sounds and wondering if it could actually

be comfortable. To her surprise, the leaves felt oddly soft, making the old stone bed feel just as comfortable as her own. Closing her eyes without realizing it, Saderia laid her head down on the leafy covering, imagining what life might have been like for whatever ancient animal had walked these caves before her.

All at once, her exhaustion swept over her like a blanket. Before she even realized it, she slipped off into sleep on top of the old, leafy bed and sank into a deep unconsciousness. A tense, eerie sense of calm just one step away from fear settled into the back of her mind even as she dozed off. Despite the eerie feeling, Saderia remained undisturbed, and for the first time in what felt like forever, her sleep was calm. No nightmares penetrated her slumber and no Dreams bothered her with premonitions of a future she would have to fear. For once, things were peaceful.

What was he doing here?

The question was the only thought in the spirit's mind as she floated through the endless desert of the living world, her light brown eyes bright with anger. Her paws floated just above the shadowy sand as she sprinted through the sea of dunes, her light brown tail flying out behind her. As fast as she could, she flew toward the spirit that seemed to cause her so much trouble.

Claw's eyes flashed in the bright silver moonlight. Homesickness tugged at the back of her mind as she gazed around at her old home, but she pushed it away, trying not to let herself think about things she couldn't have. Illuminated by the bright moon, Claw bounded through the sea of soft, rolling sand dunes, her eyes locked on the land ahead of her. Just in front of her, a dark, translucent figure stood out amongst the ocean of light brown sand, almost pitch black against the glow of the moon. Claw's eyes narrowed.

This was not a part of the desert she liked to be in. As it was, the desert was vast. Even for dingoes, it was hard to navigate the enormous sea of sand. The position of the sun could act as their guide, but after a while, most dingoes had most important locations memorized by their position to their camp. If they found themselves in a place they didn't normally travel, finding their way back to camp was tough. Many parts of the desert were widely ignored by the dingoes if they weren't close enough to camp or rich

enough in prey to act as good hunting spots. For that reason, out-of-the-way places were almost always used as graveyards.

The land around her was no exception. Far away from any camp—both old and new—the sandy ground all around her had been used to bury fallen pack members for more years than she could count. Every inch of ground beneath her probably hid another skeleton. Claw was pretty sure her own grave was somewhere around there, but that was one of the many things she preferred not to think about.

Most graves were left unmarked. After most dingoes were buried, their gravesites were usually forgotten and never visited. She doubted Dingo even remembered where hers was. She certainly didn't. It was a somewhat depressing prospect, but a realistic one nonetheless. Dingoes just couldn't be bothered to remember where the graves of their loved ones rested in the entirety of the vast desert, especially when almost all of them were left unmarked due to the lack of anything to sufficiently mark them with.

Graves for Leaders and Second in Commands were different. Even though they were still set in out-of-the-way places, they were always grouped in the same area and marked with at least a small rock or two to make sure the dingoes remembered where they had been laid to rest. Claw supposed it was a lasting sign of their importance, though it irked her to think that even in death, the cruel dingoes that had acted as Leaders and Second in Commands before her brother's rule had received better treatment.

Shaking off her thoughts, she bounded to the top of a tall sand dune and narrowed her eyes. Right in front of her, a dark, ghostly figure hovered over a small, pitch black stone dug deep in the ground. The small rock stood in a long, rough line of similar stones marking other important gravesites. Compared to the other weathered rocks lined up all around it, the stone seemed bigger and relatively new. The dark figure barely spared a glance at the other grave markers. Without a word, he stared down at the small black stone on top of the grave, his back turned to Claw.

A low growl rumbled in Claw's throat. Flattening her ears, she lunged toward the dark figure and skidded to a stop just behind him, her eyes flashing with fury. "Dastarius!" When the figure jumped and whipped

around in surprise, she narrowed her eyes and bared her fangs in a snarl. “What are you doing by my brother’s grave?”

Blinking in surprise, Dastarius stared back at her in shock, then slowly narrowed his eyes, a dark scowl tugging at the corners of his mouth. “Must you *always* follow me?” Before Claw could snap back at him, he merely turned back to the grave and dismissively flicked his tail. “I can go where I want, Claw. Besides, what do you care if I’m here?”

“I don’t want you in the desert,” Claw snapped back, flattening her ears. “And I don’t want you near *any* of my brothers!” She paused and studied him with narrowed brown eyes, then gritted her teeth and dropped her voice to a lower, tenser growl. “What are you doing here anyway? It’s just a dumb grave. Nothing special. What could you possibly want here?”

Dastarius let out a long sigh and rolled his eyes. “If you must know, I was feeling a bit curious about you, Claw. I couldn’t find your grave, so I decided to check these ones out to see what I could discover about your family. You see, in the forest, other animals mark the graves of their loved ones with tombstones inscribed with a few words that reveal a little more about the dead.”

Claw narrowed her eyes with a testy frown. “Well, as you can see, we don’t do things in the desert the way you do things in the forest.”

“Obviously.” Dastarius snorted and raised an eyebrow. “You dingoes are a lot less sophisticated than us forest animals. Do you just throw an animal in the ground and forget about them?”

Claw gritted her teeth and shot him a cold glare. “We prefer to treasure the actual animal rather than the piece of land they’re buried in. But save the dingo/forest animal debate for later, and get away from Bone’s grave!”

“Why?” Dastarius cast her a cool glance out of the corner of his eye and lightly flicked his tail. “What do you care if I’m here? Isn’t he the one who killed you or something?”

“I don’t care,” Claw snapped, lashing her tail. “Just leave!”

Dastarius just frowned and turned away. Ignoring her entirely, he gazed down the line of weathered stones marking the graves of fallen dingoes, his eyes gleaming with mild interest. “Is your father’s grave here, too?” he mused, completely disregarding her protests.

Claw bared her fangs and gave him a furious glare, trying to bite back an annoyed growl. “What do you care? They’re both dead either way. And it’s not like their graves are special like your fancy forest graves are.”

“Touchy, touchy.” Dastarius shot her a glance with raised eyebrows and just rolled his eyes. “You should try relaxing sometime, Claw. Being so high-strung all the time can still take its toll on you as a ghost. For instance, it seems to make you incredibly annoying.”

Claw just shook her head and rolled her eyes. “Go ahead and keep up the insults, Dastarius. It’s not like I haven’t heard them all before.”

“Hmm,” was all Dastarius said in response. After a moment of silence, he slowly tore his eyes off the graves and turned around to face her, his eyes alight with mild curiosity. “Why are these the only graves that are marked? I’m sure a lot more of you than this have died, considering your violent past.”

Claw flattened her ears and shot him a long glare. “Only the graves of Leaders and Second in Commands get marked. What’s it to you?”

Dastarius’s ears pricked up. “So your brother was a Leader? Sorry,” he added, seeing her narrow her eyes with a scowl. “I wasn’t really paying that much attention during that part of my son’s adventure.”

Claw just rolled her eyes. “He was Second in Command, you idiot. Can you please just stop this stupid bantering and get back to the spirit realm?”

“The spirit realm bores me.” With a simple shrug of his shoulders, Dastarius turned his back on her and gazed back at the graves. “I’m quite content where I am.”

Claw narrowed her eyes. With a resolute scowl, she sat back on the ground and sharply flicked her ears, her eyes boring into the lion’s shadowy back. “Dastarius, if you don’t get out of my desert and away from my brother’s grave right now, I will sit here with you and do nothing but *annoy* you the whole time you’re here.”

Dastarius winced and feigned a shudder. “Now that *is* a threat. Congratulations to you, Claw, for speaking the first scary threat I’ve heard in a long time.”

Claw pressed a paw to her forehead and let out a long sigh, slowly shaking her head. “Dastarius...”

“Fine, I’ll leave.” With a low growl and a roll of his eyes, Dastarius reluctantly turned back to face her and rose to his paws. “There’s nothing here anyway. Unfortunately for you, you’ll have to find someone else to annoy, Claw. That is, unless you happen to follow me to the spirit realm, as well. I certainly wouldn’t put it past you.”

Claw just sighed and resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “Just stay away from my family and my desert.”

Dastarius merely shrugged. “Have it your way. This place is worthless anyway.” Without another word, he turned around to stalk away from her and vanished into thin air right before her eyes. In a flash, he was gone.

Claw narrowed her eyes and glared at the place where he had disappeared, then lowered her head with a long, weary sigh. With clouded light brown eyes, she reluctantly looked up at the graves of her father and brother out of the corner of her eye and suppressed a shudder. Biting back a sigh, she raised her head to look up at the stars and frowned, a dark shadow flitting across her face. Slowly, she shook her head, lost in thought. Just what was Dastarius up to? A dark scowl crossed her face. With all of her heart, she hoped it wasn’t something that could hurt her friends and family.

Unfortunately, she could already tell that that hope was in vain.

Chapter Sixteen

Apologies

“Saderia?”

At the sound of the soft, gentle voice, Saderia shifted in her sleep and let out a low groan. Blinking her eyes open, she groggily lifted her head and almost jumped. The small, rocky room she had fallen asleep in slowly flickered into view before her blurry eyes. The engraved walls all around her slowly crept into focus, but Saderia barely spared a glance at them. With eyes bright with concern, Dash and Jeb hovered over her on the edge of the leafy stone slab.

Saderia blinked in surprise. Sleepily, she shook her head and frowned, her mind spinning with confusion and misunderstanding. “Wh-Where am I?”

“You’re in a cave in the valley you wanted to explore,” Dash murmured, his calm amber eyes boring into hers and a faint smile twitching at the corners of his mouth. “Jeb and I found you sleeping in here a few hours ago. We decided not to wake you up because you seemed so tired earlier today and you actually seemed to be sleeping well.”

Narrowing her eyes, Saderia shook off her sleepiness and groggily pushed herself up. With a hint of surprise, she gazed around at the strange, stony room, feeling her heart speed up when she recognized it. Feeling her face burn with embarrassment, she self-consciously ducked her head and uncomfortably shuffled her paws. “I was really sleeping that long, huh? You guys could have woken me up earlier if you wanted to. I didn’t mean to fall asleep. I just climbed up here to see what it was like, and it’s like...I just fainted or something.”

Dash waved her worries away with a gentle flick of his tail. “It’s okay, Saderia. You haven’t been sleeping well and you’re tired. We understand.”

Saderia hesitated, then managed a grateful smile and a slow nod. Taking in what Dash had said and trying to reacquaint herself with her

surroundings, she slowly turned to gaze out at the stony room around her. Only after a few minutes of silence did realization finally dawn on her. Feeling her eyes widen and her heart skip in surprise, she whipped around to face her two friends in shock. “Wait a minute...I was sleeping for *hours*? That...That’s longer than I’ve slept in weeks! And...I didn’t have any nightmares at all!”

Dash blinked in surprise, then gave her a wide smile. “That’s great, Saderia.”

Saderia nodded absently, her heart suddenly glowing with hope and excitement. “I can actually sleep well here. I don’t know why, but I can. This place is just so...peaceful or something.” Practically bouncing with excitement, she whipped around to face her friends with wide, eager eyes. “I just had a great idea! Why don’t we make this place our secret hideout or something? It could be like our own little club—a place that only we know about that we can visit every day! We could hang out and play here, and I could take a nap to catch up on my sleep!”

Dash grinned a wide, warm grin. “That’s a great idea!”

Jeb smiled and eagerly nodded his head. “I think that’d be cool! It’s not *that* hard to get here once you get used to it!”

“Right!” With a bright gleam in her eyes, Saderia smiled at her two friends, her tail curling up with excitement. “We could have our own secret club here. We could even give it a name!”

Dash grinned and chuckled. “Sounds good to me. What should we call it?”

Saderia paused and narrowed her eyes in thought. After a few beats of silence, she grinned and gazed out at the cave around her with shining amber eyes. “Club Paradise. I can’t think of a better name to give this place.”

Dash glanced around at the small cave and nodded with a faint smile. “Sounds good to me. What about you, Jeb?”

Jeb nodded with a bright, happy smile. “That sounds neat! I think it’d be cool to come here every day—to Club Paradise!”

“Yeah,” Dash agreed with a grateful, happy smile. “That would be great. It would be just us here.”

Saderia nodded eagerly. “Yeah.” With shining eyes, she let out a soft, happy sigh, her heart glowing with hope. “Just us.”

Bright golden sunlight shimmered in Saderia's gleaming amber eyes. Smiling happily, she bounded through the ocean of sand dunes in the vast, familiar desert with Dash and Jeb close behind her. After waking up early that Saturday morning and making sure it was okay with her parents, she had set out with her friends into the desert to visit Dingo. Already, a few hours had passed by under the burning desert sun. Absently, Saderia trailed through the dunes alongside her friends, lost in thoughts of her new hideout. She couldn't wait to visit it again—and next time, maybe she could visit it with *all* of her friends.

Shaking the thoughts out of her head, she glanced up at the dark lion padding close beside her on her right and narrowed her eyes, a more serious frown creeping across her face. "You're going to be okay when we get there, right?"

Dash let out a weary sigh and nodded. "Yes, Saderia. Don't worry about it. I'll apologize."

"Good." Trying to hide her doubts, Saderia gazed out at the dunes ahead and kept walking.

On her other side, Jeb looked up at them with curious, uneasy blue and green eyes. "You're not going to start fighting again, are you? It was really weird when you two were fighting back in the woods. I thought you were really going to hurt each other."

"Well, we kind of did," Dash replied with a wince, scowling at a deep scar across his shoulder. Seeing Jeb's nervous look, he just sighed and squeezed up a weak smile. "Don't worry, Jeb. I won't start another fight with Dingo. Saderia and I already talked about it."

Jeb managed a faint, hopeful smile. "That's good."

Saderia nodded absently and started to say something, then abruptly broke off. Before she could say a word, a wild, dangerous howl suddenly boomed out from behind the dune just ahead of her, making her freeze in place. Her eyes opened wide. Letting out a gasp, she whipped around with her friends just in time to see two canines leap to the top of the sand dune in front of her, their fur bristling and their fangs bared in two low, threatening growls.

All the fur on Saderia's back stood on end. With a wild cry, she instantly stumbled backward and tensed for a fight, then froze. Hardly

daring to breathe, she stared up at the dingoes with wide eyes and felt her tension fade away when she recognized the long, messy red fur and short, orange hair of Rip and Tear. At the same time, Dingo's brothers paused and stared down at them in surprise, their growls abruptly cutting off. Shock and recognition flashed across their faces when they realized who they were. Exchanging a quick glance, the two brothers hesitated, then hastily bounded down the side of the dune, forcing their fur to lie flat.

When the two dingoes skidded to an abrupt halt in front of her, Saderia frowned and nervously narrowed her eyes, her tail twitching tensely back and forth. "Rip? Tear? Is...something wrong?"

Rip sighed and glanced down at the ground with a dark scowl. "Sorry, tiger. I didn't know you would be coming today." When Saderia frowned and gave him an inquisitive look, he just rolled his eyes and growled under his breath. "It's those stupid outcasts, Rock's old followers. Ever since they attacked the other day, we've all been kind of high-strung."

Saderia's eyes widened in shock. "Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Feeling her heart skip a beat, she stared up at them in disbelief. "What attack? When did they attack?"

For the first time, she looked closely at the two brothers and felt her heart beat faster when she realized how ragged they looked. Deep, unhealed scars crisscrossed Rip's face and lined his shaggy red sides. A few droplets of dried blood still crusted his fur, almost unnoticeable against his natural dark red color. Jagged scars covered Tear's body, as well, more noticeable beneath his shorter orange fur. Both of their fur stuck up in wild clumps, uncared for and almost tense with unease. Her heart skipped.

Rip shared a long, knowing glance with Tear, then slowly looked back at Saderia and flattened his ears. "Remember when Bunny went missing and then you and my brother found her and brought her back? Well, right after we set out into the desert to go home that night, we were attacked by Rock's old followers. There were...six of them, I think." As if looking for confirmation, he cast a sideways glance at Tear and frowned when his brother held up five claws instead. "Fine, five," he amended, shooting his brother an irked glare. "Anyway, they really did a number on me, Dingo, and the others. We managed to fight them off and get back to camp, but we weren't feeling too hot there for a while. Dingo still isn't doing that great."

Saderia's heart lurched and her eyes grew wide with distress.
“Dingo’s hurt? Badly?”

Rip shrugged and uncomfortably looked away “He’s been worse...”

“Is he okay?” With a tense, terrified gleam in his narrowed eyes, Dash stiffly stepped forward to face them, his face oddly dark with fear and guilt. With a pang of sympathy, Saderia realized how horrible Dash must feel, considering his own brawl with Dingo earlier that day had probably weakened him and left him in a much worse condition to fight.

With a faint frown, Rip just shrugged and flicked his tail. “He’ll be fine. It’s not like he’s dying as we speak or anything. He’s way too tough to be taken down by a couple of worthless outcasts.”

Saderia narrowed her eyes. Even with his reassuring words, she couldn’t help but feel tense and frantic with fear. “We have to see him.” Her tail flicked urgently across the sand. “Can you guys please take us to the camp?”

Rip lightly shrugged and nodded. “Sure, we’ll lead the way. Tear, you walk behind us to make sure no one follows us.” While his younger brother bounded to walk behind the crowd of forest animals, Rip started to turn around to lead the way, then paused. With a tense frown, he slowly looked back and met Saderia’s eyes. A dark shadow crossed his face. “It shouldn’t be too dangerous out here, but...just in case, do me a favor and keep your eyes peeled. You never know when these idiots are going to strike.”

“Dingo!” With a wild gasp, Saderia lunged forward and raced past Rip the instant she staggered to the top of the tall sand dune looming over the camp. The second the camp flickered into view, she dove down the side of the sand dune and charged toward it as fast as her paws could carry her, her heart pounding wildly in her chest. In a flash, she flew into the camp, ignoring the surprised glances of the softly murmuring dingoes scattered all around the camp. Paw steps sounded behind her as Rip, Tear, Dash, and Jeb bounded after her, but she didn’t look back. Her entire body felt tense with fear. “Dingo!”

“He’s probably in his den!” Rip shouted, skidding to a stop on the outskirts of the camp and nodding toward the two large dens at the very back.

With a hasty nod, Saderia looked up at the two dens and instantly raced toward them, her heart hammering with urgency. “Dash, Jeb, stay here a minute! I’ll go see him first to see how hurt he is!” Without waiting to see her friends’ reactions, she flew across the center of the camp, leaving Dash and Jeb stumbling to a clumsy stop beside the sandy water trough.

In a flash, she flew across the burning sand and skidded to an abrupt halt only when she reached the tallest den at the back of the wide camp. Feeling her heart beat faster, she cautiously crept closer to the low, shadowy entrance of the den and peeked into the darkness. “Dingo?” she called, her voice soft and hesitant. “Are you awake?”

When her eyes adjusted to the darkness of the den, she could just barely make out a lanky canine lying slumped on his side at the very back of the den. At the sound of her voice, the shaggy dog instantly pricked up one of his ears and slowly glanced back over his shoulder. With a low, pained groan, he looked up at her with dull brown eyes and managed a faint smile when he saw who had called him.

“Saderia?” With a faint gleam of warmth in his clouded brown eyes, he wearily rolled around to look at her and let out a long sigh. “Hold on. I’m up. I’ll come out.”

Saderia frowned. “Don’t do it if it hurts.” Even as she eyed him with a worried scowl, though, she took a step back, knowing her protests would have no affect on him. Dingo just didn’t care enough about his well-being to listen to her.

“It’s not that bad. I’ve had worse pain.” With an indignant frown, Dingo winced and reluctantly rose to his paws to slip out of his dark den.

Saderia just rolled her eyes and resisted the urge to sigh. That was what Dingo always said when he was hurt.

A second later, Dingo wearily poked his head out from the shadows of the den and staggered out onto the sand, blinking sleep from his eyes and shaking himself to unearth the sand clinging to his fur. With a wince, he almost stumbled, but caught himself just in time.

Saderia’s eyes widened in dismay when he looked up to face her. “You look awful!”

Dingo managed a faint grin. “Nice to see you, too, Saderia.”

Flattening her ears, she gave him a long look and testily flicked her tail. “I didn’t mean it like that.” Ignoring Dingo’s soft chuckle, Saderia just

rolled her eyes and let out a soft sigh. Trying not to wince, she stepped closer to study him and felt her heart lurch with dismay.

Dark scars ran across Dingo's sides and split open the skin on his face. Several deep scratch marks lined one side of his muzzle. Dried blood speckled his unruly brown fur, making it stick up all over his lanky body in wild, unkempt clumps. One particularly deep, bloody gash ran along the side of his leg. When she looked closely at his leg, she realized he was holding his paw just off the ground and leaning more heavily on the others to avoid putting too much weight on it. Several drops of blood speckled his scarred face as well as his body. A few more shreds than normal tore up his left ear, as well.

Saderia let out a long-suffering sigh and frowned. "Dingo, if you don't stop getting into fights, you won't have any ear left."

Dingo let out a soft chuckle and grinned. "If I had any choice in these things, my ear would still be intact, Saderia."

Saderia just shook her head and rolled her eyes. "You're not too hurt, are you?"

Dingo shook his head and tried to hide a wince when that action seemed to hurt him. "No way. I'm fine. The only reason I was resting in my den is because Rip wouldn't stop yelling at me until I did. For some reason, he's all worried about me." He shrugged and rolled his eyes. "Oh well. At least I get a break."

Saderia narrowed her eyes with a worried frown. "Are you sure you're okay?"

Dingo let out an exaggerated groan and tried to hide a grin. "Yes, Saderia. I'm fine."

She let out a soft sigh and flattened her ears. "Well, that's good, I guess. When Rip and Tear told me there had been a fight, I just got so worried." Her eyes narrowed. "Everyone else is okay, too, right? Lightning and Bunny are fine?"

"Yep. Lightning's only got a few scars and Bunny's completely fine, just a little fired up." With a bright grin, Dingo chuckled to himself and shook his head. "The second they attacked, she tried to bite their heads off, and she hasn't stopped ranting about it since."

Saderia shook her head, unable to hide a grin. "That definitely sounds like Bunny."

Dingo nodded with a slight chuckle. Sitting back on the sand, he curled his tail around his scarred paws and faced her with a more curious smile. “So what’s the occasion? Just wanted to say hi?”

Saderia nodded with a smile. “I always come to visit on Saturdays. Besides...” She paused, then narrowed her eyes uncertainly, a cautious frown creeping across her face. “Dash is here...”

“Oh, wonderful!” Dingo grinned a wide, sarcastic grin and eagerly flicked his tail. “Now I can get some more scars!”

Saderia gave him a cool look. “He’s not here to fight. If he still wanted to fight with you, I’d have left him in that valley.”

“That would have been funny,” Dingo replied in a mock sincere tone of voice, still grinning a wide grin.

“Dingo.” Saderia narrowed her eyes and gave him a warning look. “You’re not going to start something with him, are you?”

With a roll of his eyes, Dingo just sighed and dropped the grin, his face turning serious. “No, Saderia. I’ll refrain, for your sake.”

“Thank you.” With a slight smile, she studied him cautiously, then took a deep breath. “Dash...He just wants to talk to you. Is it okay if I go get him?”

Dingo just shrugged with an apathetic frown. “Sure. What’s the worst that could happen? Even if we start fighting, it will at least entertain Rip and probably the rest of the dingoes, and they could use an excuse to lighten up a bit.”

Saderia just shook her head, unable to hide a grin. “All right, Dingo. I’ll go get him. Just try to be civil to each other.”

“I’ll do my best,” Dingo replied, giving her a wry grin.

With a roll of her eyes, Saderia just smiled and turned to walk away. Looking up, she caught sight of Dash and Jeb standing a few paces away from her near the sandy water trough, uncomfortably watching her and Dingo. She narrowed her eyes. Taking a deep breath, she padded back through the crowded dingo camp toward the water trough where her friends were waiting, hoping beyond hope that Dash and Dingo wouldn’t get into a fight.

The instant she stepped out in front of the water trough, her two friends looked up at her with tense, questioning expressions. Dash’s eyes

instantly snapped to her face and darkened with discomfort and unease. Nervously, he looked down and shuffled his paws, looking out of place.

“Is he, um...okay?” With an awkward frown, Dash studied his paws and tried not to look up, seeming even more uncomfortable than ever. It probably didn’t help that most of the dingoes gathered all around the wide camp kept casting him curious glances and whispering to each other, seeming to remember his fight with Dingo.

“Well, I guess, but you know how he is. You can never really tell.” Saderia merely shrugged and shook her head. “I think he’ll be fine.”

Dash just nodded. “Good.” He paused, then cast her an uncomfortable glance out of the corner of his eye and winced. “Uh...I suppose you want me to go over there now.”

“That would be nice,” Saderia replied, her light voice edged with a firm tone and her eyes flashing with sternness.

Dash let out a long, weary sigh and reluctantly rose to his paws. “All right. I’ll go.”

After hesitating and casting one last uncomfortable glance around at the camp, he lowered his eyes to the ground and tensely turned to pad toward the Leader’s den where Dingo sat waiting. With Jeb and Saderia following close behind him, he slowly slouched toward the Leader. His fur burned with discomfort as dingoes all over the camp turned to watch him curiously. Ignoring their wondering eyes, Dash slowly stepped up to Dingo, keeping his gaze locked on his paws. He could practically feel Dingo’s eyes burning into his skin. Keeping his gaze on the ground, he stopped just in front of the canine and narrowed his eyes, never daring to look up.

Dingo raised an eyebrow at him. “Wish I could say it’s nice to see you, Dash, but...” He trailed off and narrowed his eyes. “What do you want?”

Dash let out a soft sigh. For a long moment, he remained silent, keeping his eyes locked on his paws. After what felt like ages, he reluctantly forced himself to look up and meet Dingo’s gaze, his face dark with regret. “I just wanted to say that...I’m sorry...for what happened the other day. And for everything else, too, I guess.”

Dingo’s eyebrows shot up. Blinking several times, he glanced over Dash’s shoulder at Saderia and pricked his ears in surprise. “How’d you get him to do that?”

Dash rolled his eyes. “I’m not just doing it for Saderia, Dingo. I really am sorry.” When Dingo frowned and gave him a skeptical look, Dash just sighed and lowered his eyes to the ground. “Look, Dingo...I really am sorry for what I did. I shouldn’t have been so cold to you, and I shouldn’t have ever said anything about Claw. You were right about me and Saderia when we argued before anyway. You were right about everything. This whole thing is just getting ridiculous, and I wish none of it had ever happened. So I’m sorry, Dingo. Can we please just put this whole thing behind us?”

With dark, narrowed eyes, Dingo studied him for a long, tense moment of silence, as if debating whether or not he was being sincere. Without a word, he studied Dash’s dark expression, his tail flicking tensely back and forth and his eyes gleaming with indecision. After what felt like ages, he finally dipped his head and managed a faint smile. “All right, Dash. I forgive you. I guess I’m sorry, too.”

Dash smiled in relief. “Truce?” he offered, holding out a paw.

“Truce.” With a faint grin, Dingo warmly shook his paw. When the two of them dropped paws and sat back on the sand, Dingo lightly flicked his tail and raised an eyebrow, glancing back and forth between Saderia and Dash. “So are we all happy and not trying to kill each other now?”

Saderia just rolled her eyes and hid a grin. “Yes, Dingo. We’re all fine now.”

“Good.” Dingo lightly flicked his ears and shrugged. “It’s about time things got back to normal.” He paused, then sat back to study them with gleaming light brown eyes, acting as normal as if nothing had ever happened. “So now that we don’t all hate each other anymore and the air’s not so thick, what have you guys been up to since I last saw you?”

Saderia shrugged. “Nothing much.” She paused, then looked up with a bright, eager grin, her eyes lighting up. “But remember that place where we found Tawny? We all went back there, and it’s *amazing!* We decided to make it our own secret place—like a secret club or hideout. We’re going to go hang out there just about every day. Maybe you could join us sometime.”

Dingo cringed. “Well...you already know my position on trees, but...maybe.” He paused, then glanced past them at something over their shoulders and winced, his face growing darker and his eyes narrowing with

unease. Bewildered, Saderia glanced back over her shoulder to follow his gaze and spotted a tiny black pup sitting a few paces away by the water trough, chatting lightly with an older yellow dingo—Bunny and Lightning.

A faint frown crossed her face. Slowly, she turned back to Dingo. “Something wrong?”

Dingo blinked once, then just shook his head with a weary sigh. “No. Bunny just said something kind of strange the other night.”

Dash raised an eyebrow. “What else is new?”

Dingo cracked a grin, shaking off his unease. “I guess you’ve got a point. But anyway, what exactly is the deal with that place? What’s down there?”

Saderia smiled a wide, hopeful smile. With shining amber eyes, she described the valley she had explored the day before, explaining how she had uncovered the mysterious cave at the base of one of the ridges and fallen asleep there. After Dash and Jeb shared their own discoveries in the valley, she told Dingo how she had decided to make it into her own club for her and her friends—Club Paradise. As she described the valley, she found it much easier to talk amongst her friends—a noticeable and welcome change from the tense way she had spoken with them before. Now that everyone was slowly coming to terms with what had happened in the past, her words weren’t quite so forced. Unlike before, it wasn’t just her talking either. Dash jumped in as often as Dingo and Jeb, just the way he used to. Saderia smiled to herself with every word. The hours seemed to pass by at a warm, leisurely pace as she and her friends talked the day away.

As the sun sank closer to the horizon, Saderia and Jeb said a temporary goodbye to Dingo to go speak to some of the other pack members. While they trotted off to find Lightning, Rip, Tear, and other familiar friends, Dash stayed behind to wait for them with Dingo. Side by side, the two sat back by the Leader’s den and gazed out at the darkening camp around them, their eyes gleaming in the shadows. Silence spread out between them, but unlike before, it wasn’t tense. Just peaceful.

After a few minutes of silence, Dingo slowly turned to look up at Dash with knowing light brown eyes. “So you and Saderia are finally doing better, huh?”

Dash nodded quietly and managed a weak smile, hiding a grudging sigh. “I guess you were right all along. About...only caring about myself. I

guess I should have listened to you. I'm sorry.”

Dingo just shrugged and carelessly flicked his tail. “That’s okay, Dash. If I had been in the same place as you, I probably wouldn’t have listened to me either. We’re both kind of stubborn.” When Dash just rolled his eyes, Dingo grinned and shook his head. “Things just got a little crazy, that’s all.”

Dash let out a quiet sigh. “That’s for sure.” He paused, then looked up at Dingo with a more serious frown. “By the way, you are okay, right? After the attack?”

Dingo nodded and grinned. “Yeah, I’ll live.” He paused, then slowly lowered his eyes to the ground, a more serious frown flitting across his face. “I am going to have to figure out what to do about these outcasts, though. I can’t just have them terrorizing me and my pack all the time.”

“If you need me and Saderia to help you, just ask,” Dash offered, looking up at him with dark, serious eyes. “I’m sure you’ll think of something. Rip seems to think you’re the greatest Leader in history, after all.”

Dingo snorted and let out a soft, exasperated chuckle. “He said the same thing about Bone, so that’s not really saying much.” Rolling his eyes, he glanced at Dash out of the corner of his eye and managed a weak grin. “This Leader stuff is a lot harder than it looks. I mean, things haven’t gotten too bad yet, but it’s probably only a matter of time before they do.”

Dash winced in sympathy. “It’s got to be tough being a Leader. Especially when you’re only twelve.” Narrowing his eyes, he looked down at the ground and frowned. “Now that I think about it...I really can’t even imagine it. I mean, I guess I was Rock’s Second in Command for a while, but I didn’t really do much besides try to stay in his good graces.”

“Yep, the old Second in Commands tended to do that.” Raising his eyebrows, Dingo nodded slowly, then cracked a grin and let out a quiet chuckle. “It’s kind of weird, though. I was just thrown into being a Leader. I mean, it’s not like I had any ‘training’ or anything, since I wasn’t Second in Command first. I’m actually pretty surprised that no one has tried to call me out on that yet. After all, I’m pretty sure there’s *never* been a Leader who wasn’t Second in Command first. It’s one of those things that’s just not done.”

Dash chuckled softly. “I’m sure the dingoes don’t care after everything you’ve done for them. They’re probably still just glad to be free.”

Dingo shrugged and sighed. “Yeah, I guess so.” With clouded light brown eyes, he turned to gaze out at the darkened camp and pricked his ears when he caught sight of Saderia and Jeb.

Side by side, the two padded away from a crowd of canines milling around the center of camp and bounded toward Dash and Dingo. In a flash, they skidded to a stop just in front of their two friends, their eyes glowing in the darkness of the coming night.

A weak, sad smile crossed Saderia’s face and a soft sigh escaped her throat. “Well, I guess it’s time to say goodbye, guys. Hopefully, we’ll be able to see each other again soon.”

Dingo smiled and flicked her warmly with his tail. “We will. Goodbye, Saderia. Goodbye, Jeb.”

While Jeb managed a weak smile and waved back, Saderia just sighed and nodded to him. “Goodbye, Dingo.” With one last, sad glance back at the Leader, she took a deep breath and turned around to lead the way back through the camp, flicking her tail to signal for Dash and Jeb to follow.

While Saderia and Jeb turned to walk away, Dash let out a soft sigh. With a sad smile, he rose to his paws and took a step after them, giving Dingo one last weak grin. “Well, I guess I’ll see you later, Dingo.”

“Sounds good to me.” With a warm smile, Dingo flicked him lightly with his tail, then paused. Before Dash could walk away, he frowned with a more serious gleam in his eyes and held up a paw to stop him. “Oh, and Dash?” When Dash paused and glanced back over his shoulder, Dingo gave him a faint smile. “Do me a favor, and look after Saderia for me.”

Dash managed a faint smile. “Don’t worry. I will.”

“Good.” With a knowing gleam in his light brown eyes, Dingo held up his tail in farewell. “I’ll see you soon.”

Dash just smiled and flicked his tail in response. Giving Dingo one last glance out of the corner of his eye, he turned around to follow Saderia and Jeb out of the dark camp, feeling his heart glow with equal amounts of hope and relief. His eyes seemed to shine straight through the shadows as

realization dawned on him. After all this time, he had finally managed to break away from Dastarius.

In their last meeting, Dastarius had said that Dash hated almost everyone on ‘the good side.’ Now he didn’t. Now things were right again. Everyone was friends once again, and Dash felt a whole lot lighter, knowing he no longer had to hate anyone.

A warm smile crossed his face as he padded through the camp. For the first time in a long, long time, he had finally done something right.

“Did you have fun with Dingo?” The instant Saderia and Dash stumbled through the shadowed door into their house, Karenisha stepped toward them, a bright, hopeful smile on her face. Her warm amber eyes seemed to shimmer even in the darkness of night.

Letting the door click shut behind her, Saderia looked up at her mother and grinned. “Yeah, it was great to see him again. Except...he kind of got hurt right after he left the forest the other day.” Narrowing her eyes with a worried frown, she watched her mother closely the instant she trailed off, searching for any sign of the intense worry and fear that usually flashed across her face at the mention of danger.

To her surprise, Karenisha narrowed her eyes in concern, but didn’t flinch. Her amber irises glowed with worry, but they didn’t dull with the same terror she had shown before—only concern. “He’s all right, isn’t he?”

Saderia blinked several times, then nodded quickly. “Yeah, he’s doing fine. He’ll recover pretty fast.”

Karenisha nodded and managed a weak, hopeful smile. “That’s good. You didn’t run into any trouble while you were over there, did you?”

Saderia hastily shook her head. “No, Mom. Everything was fine.”

A bright smile warmed Karenisha’s face and her eyes gleamed with relief. “That’s good, at least.” Without another word, she turned to pad back into the dining room to finish the dinner she had left behind when she had come out to greet them.

With wide eyes, Saderia stared after her in surprise, stunned at how quickly she had recovered and how calm she seemed. When Karenisha sat down at the dining room table in the room just in front of her, she felt a warm smile twitch at the corners of her mouth. Slowly, her eyes brightened with understanding and her heart glowed with realization. For the first time,

she realized that her mother truly was back to normal after everything she had gone through.

Finally, she was her old, proud self.

“Something very, very bad happened here.”

A soft, sinister voice whispered the words in Saderia’s ear. With a gasp, she opened her eyes into nothing but sheer, overwhelming darkness. The wild, almost violent pitter-patter of rain echoed through the darkness, broken only by the jarring crash of thunder in the distance. When Saderia strained her ears to listen, she could just pick up a soft, almost indistinguishable voice chanting in the background. As hard as she could, she struggled to listen and felt her heart skip when the low, murmuring voice grew louder and whispered softly through the air.

“The Daughter of the Fiftieth Generation of the royal family will be gifted with the Power of Dreams stronger than any member of the royal family before her...Her spirit will light the way...Her soul will guide her through her destined path...She will be expected to handle her Power responsibly and wisely...”

A wild cackling and an eerie hiss suddenly sliced through the air, cutting off the echoing words of the prophecy. Blossoming out of the darkness like pitch black flames, a million tiny, bodiless shadows suddenly swept out from the blackness around her. Their glowing red eyes flashed through the darkness and their cruel, hissing voices whispered in her ear. In a blur of black, the shadows swirled around her, sending her heart racing with fear. Their soft, cackling voices rang wildly in her ears.

“Beware an old enemy, Daughter...Beware...”

Through the wild hissing of the shadows, Saderia could just barely hear the soft, fluttering sound of turning pages whispering somewhere far off in the darkness. With each turn of the invisible pages, the soft rustling sound seemed to echo through the shadows, as if each page carried a dark warning that pulsed through the blackness like ripples on a lake.

Saderia’s heart skipped a beat. Without warning, the invisible ground dropped out beneath her paws. With a shrill, terrified scream, she plunged downward into nothing but a pitch black void. “Dash!” As loud as she could, she screamed his name as she flew through the dark void of nothingness. Taunting and cackling, the shadows followed her down,

whipping past her fur and chanting the whole time. Their wild, eerie voices rang in her ears.

“Welcome, Daughter...Return what you stole...Bring us the new world...”

Saderia’s breath caught in horror. Even as the shadows cackled in her ears, a wild burst of evil, sinister laughter boomed out around her, sending shivers racing down her spine. But it wasn’t just one voice laughing. Three different voices seemed to echo through the pitch black shadows, filling the air with their wild, inharmonious laughter. Two voices seemed achingly familiar, while the last was strange. All three of their evil cackles rang in her ears, filling her mind with the cruel sound and poisoning her heart. The only voice she recognized for sure was Dastarius’s. His cruel laughter seemed to boom out even louder than the others’, filling the darkness with its cold, triumphant sound.

“Long live the true King!”

A sinister, snake-like voice suddenly hissed through the darkness just below the wild cackling around her. “*You’ll be just another pawn in my games...*” As the words echoed through the darkness around her, the shadows seemed to hiss with laughter and excitement. Their wild, ominous murmurs grew louder and louder until she could practically hear them in the beating of her own heart.

“Welcome, Daughter...Bring us the new world...Bring us what you stole...”

A wild scream tore out of her throat. Squeezing her eyes shut, she hurtled through the darkness, desperately trying to shut out the terrifying voices. A split second before she crashed down at the bottom of the nearly endless void, the shadows whispered in her ear one last time in one soft, evil voice.

“Welcome the darkness, Daughter,” they breathed. “You’re on our side...”

“No!”

With a strangled scream, Saderia jolted awake in bed, her heart pounding and her sides heaving with wild, gasping breaths. Her eyes grew wide with shock. Taking in deep gasps of air, she whipped around to stare out at her shadowy room as it slowly swam into focus, her fur bristling

wildly and her claws digging into her tattered blue blanket. Every part of her felt tense with fear. Everywhere she turned, the shadows haunting her darkened room seemed to turn into memories of her Dream. All she could see around her were dark shadows with eerie, glowing eyes. Their cackling voices seemed to ring in her own mind, as if still whispering through the darkness around her. With a strangled cry, she pressed her paws to her ears, desperately trying to shut them out. Her mind spun and the entire world seemed to tilt around her until all she could see was darkness.

“Saderia!”

At the sound of the sharp voice, she snapped around with a gasp, her visions vanishing instantly. Freezing in place on top of her rumpled sheets, Saderia tensed when her eyes snapped to the doorway just a few paces away from her bed. As if suddenly splashed with a bucket of freezing cold water, her entire body went numb with surprise. The visions seemed to whisk away at once, leaving her room looking just the way it should. Her heart skipped a beat.

Dash stood in the open doorway to her room, his eyes wide with shock and concern. The instant her gaze snapped to him, he froze, his fur bristling in alarm. Hardly daring to breathe, he looked up at her with wide eyes and nervously flicked his tail. “Saderia?” Slowly, he took a step into her room and cautiously approached the bed, never tearing his eyes off hers. “What’s wrong?”

Saderia blinked several times, then abruptly shook her head and turned away from him, her heart still pounding. Desperately, she tried to remind herself that this was reality, not another sick, terrifying Dream. “N-Nothing,” she stammered, nervously clinging to her blanket and avoiding his eyes. “It was nothing.”

Dash narrowed his eyes uneasily. “Are you sure? You seem...pretty upset.”

Saderia opened her mouth to respond, then paused. Why was she being so secretive? With a tense frown, she struggled to shake off her fear and think. It was time she stopped hiding her Dreams and her feelings from the one who was supposed to be her friend. If she kept hiding things from Dash, they would never truly be friends again.

Her eyes narrowed. Slowly, she forced herself to look up and reluctantly met Dash’s eyes. For a long moment, she stared at him in

silence, then took a shaky breath and slowly let it out. “I...I think I had a Dream.”

Dash’s eyes instantly darkened with seriousness. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Saderia let out a trembling sigh and looked away. “Actually...I kind of want to deny it. I don’t want something bad to happen again...but I do think I need to talk about it...if that’s okay with you.”

Dash narrowed his eyes and nodded quickly. “Of course. I understand.” He hesitated for a single heartbeat, then slowly padded closer to her bed. Never tearing his eyes off hers, he leapt up onto the rumpled bed and sat down beside her, his eyes dark and grim. “What was it about?”

Saderia took a deep breath. In a voice as calm as she could manage, she slowly began to describe the eerie nightmare as best as she could, trying hard not to leave out any details. When she stumbled over her description of the eerie shadows and their bewildering chants, she shivered and almost winced. Her tail flicked wildly back and forth with fear as she described the cold laughter that had echoed out over the cackles of the shadows. With every word, her heart beat faster.

When she had finally finished describing the Dream, she looked up at Dash with wide, desperate eyes, hardly daring to breathe. “What do you think?”

Dash blinked at her in surprise, then slowly looked down. For a long moment, he remained silent, lost in thought, then slowly made himself look back up at her with dark, clouded eyes. “I...I don’t know what to think. What did those voices mean by...a ‘new world’? That sounds...pretty creepy to me.”

Saderia helplessly shook her head. “I don’t know. None of it makes any sense to me at all. I don’t know what they meant by ‘a new world.’ ...It does sound creepy, though.”

Dash nodded slowly, a deep frown creeping across his face. “What about the part where they said, ‘Return what you stole’? You didn’t steal anything from anybody.”

“No, I didn’t.” Saderia narrowed her eyes with a tense frown, her mind spinning with confusion. “I’ve never taken anything that belonged to someone else. I don’t know what that could possibly mean.”

“Hmm...” Narrowing his eyes, Dash gazed down at his paws for a long moment of silence, then cautiously looked back up to meet her gaze with a dark, tense frown. “What about the...‘old enemy’ those shadow things warned you about? What do you think they meant by that?”

Saderia’s eyes flashed. Flattening her ears, she uncomfortably looked away and just shook her head. “Well...I have a lot of old enemies, but...”

“But it probably means Dastarius, right?” With a tense, cautious frown, Dash eyed her warily, watching her face to see her reaction.

Saderia shrugged and helplessly shook her head. “Maybe. That’s most likely what it means. I even heard his voice in the Dream...but I don’t think he’s the *only* one they meant.”

Dash blinked in surprise. “What do you mean? You think they meant *more* enemies than just Dastarius? Why would they only mention *one* old enemy then?”

Saderia let out a weary sigh and slowly shook her head. “I’m not sure. Maybe they only mentioned one because they were warning me that I should fear a lot of old enemies...but only one at a time for different situations...” She sighed and pressed a paw to her forehead. “I don’t know. I don’t know what I’m saying. This Dream stuff doesn’t make any sense to me. It never has!”

“No, you could be right.” With wide amber eyes, Dash looked up at her in surprise, his face bright with hope. “That actually...kind of makes sense in a really weird way. So that could be what that part meant, but...what about the rest of it?”

Saderia lowered her head and let out a long, weary breath. “I don’t know, Dash, and to be honest...I almost don’t want to know. I don’t want to have to deal with another war or some other catastrophe. All I want is a little bit of rest before I get up to face the next day, but I can’t even have that because of these Dreams.” She shook her head with a roll of her eyes. “Maybe I should try going back to sleep. Maybe I’ll be able to Dream a little more.”

Dash narrowed his eyes with a worried frown and gently pressed his tail to her shoulder. “If you think that’s best, then go ahead, Saderia. But that Dream seemed to really scare you.”

"It did," she murmured, biting back a sigh. "But I'm exhausted anyway..." With a dull, shadowed look, she started to lie back on the rumpled blanket, but Dash pressed a paw against her shoulder to stop her.

"Saderia..." Narrowing his eyes, he firmly met her gaze and gently patted her shoulder. "Don't let these Dreams get to you. I know they're tough, but...I don't want you to keep getting upset like this. Before, you were so determined and so ready to face these things and deal with whatever the future decided to throw at you. I don't want your old spirit to be destroyed by your own Dreams. You can't let the war scare you and keep you from solving future problems. You did win the war. You did save everyone you could possibly save. And you can do it again with whatever you have to face next."

Blinking in surprise, Saderia turned to look up at him with wide eyes, her expression stunned. For a long moment, she stared at him in shock, then slowly looked down at the ground with wide, distant eyes, feeling his words sink in and her heart beat faster with surprise. "You're right..." Shaking her head, she gazed around at her room and suddenly gritted her teeth, her amber eyes flaring with a deep, flickering fire. Resolution shone on her face and her voice grew stronger. "I'm going back to sleep so I can learn more about this and see if I can get some rest. In the morning, I'll tell you and Jeb if I Dreamed anything else, and maybe we can work through it. In fact, after school, let's go to Club Paradise and talk about it to see if we can figure out what it means."

With narrowed amber eyes, she stared down at her paws and tensely flicked her tail. "Whatever's going to happen...it's not going to ruin me like the war did. I'm going to beat whatever tries to hurt me in the future. All I need to do is keep my wits about me."

Dash blinked in surprise, then smiled a wide, hopeful smile. "That's the spirit, Saderia! You sound just like your old self."

Saderia managed a grin, feeling her heart leap with hope. "Good."

Dash's eyes glimmered with warmth and relief. "I'm sure you'll be able to deal with whatever happens. It's just what you do." He paused, then gave her a light smile and a flick of his tail. "Do you want me to leave you alone now so you can get some sleep?"

Saderia nodded and gave him a weak smile. "Yeah, I guess so. I'll see you in the morning."

Dash returned the bright grin and nodded. “Goodnight, Saderia.” With one last glance back at her, Dash carefully slipped off the bed and turned to pad toward the darkened door. When he padded through the entranceway and shut the door tightly behind him, Saderia narrowed her eyes and glared out at the darkness around her, challenging it.

“*Beware an old enemy...*” Her eyes gleamed through the shadows and she curled her lip in a scowl. “An old enemy should beware *me*.”

Chapter Seventeen

Watched

“That’s some Dream...” With wide blue and green eyes, Jeb stared down at his paws in shock, hardly daring to breathe. Beside him, Dash stared down at the wild grasses below and simply nodded, too lost in thought to speak. Above them, Saderia gazed down at them with dark amber eyes, waiting for them to speak up.

Last night, she had tried to fall back asleep, but after hours of struggling to force herself to Dream, she had slipped back into unconsciousness only to wake up seconds later, startled by a regular nightmare instead of an infinitely more important Dream. Once she had realized what had happened, she had been less scared than angry. It had taken almost half the day to recover from her fury at herself for scaring herself with nightmares instead of Dreaming. Only at the end of the day when she, Dash, and Jeb had left school and bounded through the dark woods to their new club in the wide valley had she managed to push away her annoyance.

After breaking out of the thick woods and climbing down past the waterfall, the three of them had waded through the thick grass covering their newly dubbed Club Paradise and bounded toward the flat stones just a few feet away from the sparkling pool of water. Saderia had leapt up onto the largest stone overlooking the smaller flat stones around it. While Dash and Jeb had leapt up onto two of the smaller stones and sat back to look up at her, Saderia had started to describe her Dream. Dash had already heard it, but he had listened intently as she retold it to Jeb, trying to find any new details or meanings he had missed last night. By the time she finished, both of them looked grim with fear and uncertainty.

Jeb shivered at the thought of her creepy Dream. “What exactly were those...shadow things?”

Saderia shrugged and uncomfortably looked down at her paws. “I have no idea, Jeb, but they were really creepy. I think I saw them in another

Dream before this, but I don't really know where they came from or what they mean. I don't think they're the most important thing anyway."

"We've got to try to figure out what this 'new world' they're talking about is," Dash mused, his eyes narrowed in thought. "And we've also got to figure out which old enemy they might be talking about and what they might do in the future."

"We should also probably try to figure out what it is those shadows think I 'stole,'" Saderia murmured, thinking back to her Dream with a shiver. She paused, then gazed down at her two friends with a tense, uncertain frown. "So...does anyone have any ideas? I know that Dream doesn't give us much to go on, but based on past experiences and such... maybe we can come up with some decent ideas."

Jeb frowned and narrowed his eyes in thought. "Do you think the 'old enemy' might mean..." Wincing, he trailed off before he could continue his sentence and shot Dash a tense, uneasy glance, uncomfortably biting his lip. "Um..."

"Dastarius?" Guessing what Jeb had wanted to say, Dash simply nodded and shrugged, trying to hide his discomfort and seem unaffected. "Yeah, possibly. We decided last night that there's a good chance it might be him."

"Yes, there is," Saderia murmured, lost in thought. A tense frown crossed her face and her tail flicked tensely across the rock. "So...what if it is Dastarius? What exactly do you think he might get up to in the future? His plan already failed, so..."

Dash's ears shot up in surprise and a sharp prickle of guilt shivered through his fur. "Um..." With a nervous, uneasy frown, he looked down at the ground and tensely shuffled his paws when Saderia turned to look at him in surprise, his expression tense with discomfort. "R-Remember when we were talking and I told you all the things I hadn't told you about before, Saderia?" When she nodded, he winced and flattened his ears in shame. "Uh...I actually...forgot to tell you something else. It-It was just an accident!" he added quickly, looking up at her with wide, pleading amber eyes. "I just didn't remember it, I swear!"

Saderia blinked in surprise, then slowly narrowed her eyes and nodded, an uneasy frown creeping across her face. "That's okay, I guess... as long as you're going to tell me now."

Dash let out a grateful sigh. "I will. It...It's about Dastarius. I...I saw him in a dream...recently."

Saderia's ears shot up in shock. "What?"

"It wasn't my choice!" Dash said quickly, his fur bristling with panic and his eyes wide with desperation. "I swear! Look, I'll tell you everything. I'm sorry I forgot to tell you earlier, but...maybe it will give us some ideas now." When Saderia just frowned and uncertainly nodded for him to speak, he took a deep breath and made himself speak up as evenly as possible. Struggling not to leave out a single detail, he described how Dastarius had visited him and asked him to open some strange, ancient books for him, only to threaten him later when he refused. Trying not to wince, Dash hastily relayed everything they had said to each other without leaving out anything he remembered—even the parts that made him look back. Hoping beyond hope that Saderia wouldn't be angry at him, he fell silent and nervously looked up at her when he finished his story, his tail twitching tensely back and forth and his eyes boring into hers, begging for her to understand.

Saderia frowned and narrowed her eyes curiously, thinking carefully over everything Dash had told her. "That's...interesting." She paused, then looked up at him with a tense frown, her eyes shining with disbelief. "He actually threatened to keep visiting you against your will if you didn't do what he wanted in the hopes that I would stop trusting you if I found out?"

Dash winced and nodded miserably, shrinking under her tense gaze.

Saderia curled her lip and shook her head in disgust. "I really hate him." She paused for a heartbeat of silence, then narrowed her eyes and tensely lashed her tail. "You *didn't* do it, did you?"

"No!" With wide eyes, Dash looked up and shook his head almost violently, his fur prickling with panic. He paused, then winced and nervously flattened his ears. "I...I thought about it...I was afraid of what he threatened me with...but I realized before I agreed to it that it was better for you to *think* I was doing something for him than to actually do it..."

Saderia let out a soft sigh and relaxed, knowing he was telling the truth. "Good." She paused, then narrowed her eyes in thought, her tail swishing tensely back and forth. A burst of excitement suddenly flashed through her as something clicked in her mind. Sharply, she looked up at her friends, her heart pounding with urgency. "In the Dream...I heard the sound

of pages turning in the background. Could those have been the pages of the books he was talking about?"

Dash blinked in surprise, then frowned. "Maybe. But...what do they mean? What do you think is so important about these books? I mean...they're just books, after all. I don't really see what could be so bad about them."

"I don't either," Saderia murmured. "But I remember that when I heard the sound of those pages turning, they gave me chills." A deep frown crossed her face. "What I don't get is *why*. What would Dastarius want with *books*?"

Dash shrugged hopelessly. "That's what I wondered when he first told me he wanted them. All he told me was that he was really curious about them. At the time, I guess I figured he had just gotten desperate and bored after his plan failed or something. He didn't tell me why he wanted those books."

Saderia narrowed her eyes and tensely shook her head. "Dastarius doesn't do things like that unless he's serious about them. That much, I know."

Jeb frowned and glanced back and forth between them, his eyes shining with wonder. "Do you guys really think these books are that important?"

Saderia let out a long, weary sigh. "I don't know. I don't see what they could possibly have to do with the other parts of the Dream. What bothers me now, though, is that Dastarius is still doing things—like visiting Dash. I thought he would have given up after his plan failed during the war, but apparently something else has caught his interest." Her eyes darkened with a grim, worried shadow. "I wonder what kind of plan he's concocting now..." With a wary frown, she hesitated, then cast Dash a long, searching glance. "Do you have any idea what he could be up to?"

Dash frowned and slowly shook his head. "No, I have no idea. He told me that he didn't actually have any plots 'on hand,' but Dastarius lies. And he lies in that weird way where you can never actually tell if he *is* lying or telling the truth. Or even telling the truth *while* lying."

"Dastarius is tricky," Saderia agreed, her eyes growing dark and grim. "He's by far the worst enemy I've ever had to face, and he works in weird ways. For all I know, this whole thing with the books could very well

be some sort of diversion or something. I don't know. Dastarius's plans are never straightforward, so I somehow doubt we'll be able to find any connections or even come close to understanding it, even with the information we have."

Dash's ears drooped with regret and a tired breath escaped his throat. "So it's hopeless trying to figure it out?"

Saderia let out a quiet sigh, her eyes growing dull. "Probably. This whole book thing doesn't make sense anyway. We'd probably have better luck trying to figure out the rest of the Dream first."

Dash nodded and lowered his eyes to the ground without a word, sinking deep into his thoughts.

Beside him, Jeb narrowed his eyes and silently gazed down at his paws, a tense frown on his face. Flicking his orange-tufted tail tensely back and forth, he gritted his teeth, as if thinking something over. After a long moment of silence, he glanced up at his two friends and hesitated, then frowned and hastily blurted out what was on his mind. "Those things... Why were they calling you 'daughter'?"

Saderia blinked and looked up at him in surprise, only now realizing how strange it seemed. "I don't know...That's a good question." She paused, then narrowed her eyes with a tense frown. "Could they mean..."

"...the Daughter of the Fiftieth Generation?" Finishing her sentence, Dash looked up at her with dark, serious eyes and frowned. "Didn't you hear the prophecy in your Dream?"

"That's right..." Saderia blinked several times in surprise, her mind whirling with wonder. "I haven't really thought about the prophecy in so long...I never even really figured out *exactly* what it meant, other than that I was supposed to do some important things and help other animals...but... it seems it could have something to do with this."

Dash narrowed his eyes in thought. "Doesn't the prophecy say something like, '*Her spirit will lead the way to a bright future,*' or something?" He looked up at Saderia with curious amber eyes. "Could that be what those shadows meant by 'a new world'?"

Saderia glanced down at him in surprise, then narrowed her eyes and firmly shook her head without even having to think about it. "No," she growled. "Those evil spirits...They would want nothing to do with the bright future the prophecy said I'd bring. They even said, 'Welcome the

darkness,’ at the end of the Dream. Why would they want me to bring a bright ‘new world’?”

“Maybe they’re not evil?” Jeb suggested, even though he shivered at the thought of them.

“They’re evil,” Saderia muttered with a flat, tense scowl. “Trust me on that.”

Dash narrowed his eyes in a bewildered frown, his gaze locked tensely on his paws. “Why did they say you were on their side?”

Saderia frowned and narrowed her eyes as she thought back to the end of her Dream, just barely suppressing a shudder. “I don’t know. But I’m *not* on their side. I don’t know why they would have said something like that...Maybe they just want me on their side.”

Dash shrugged absently, lost in thought. “Maybe.”

Saderia let out a long sigh, feeling a wave of hopelessness threatening to break loose in the back of her mind. “This isn’t getting us anywhere. I don’t see how we can work out any more meanings from this. Maybe we’ll just have to wait for more hints...”

Dash frowned and quickly looked up at her, his eyes bright with concern. “Don’t get discouraged, Saderia. Your Dreams are always confusing.”

“I guess.” Letting out a soft sigh, Saderia gazed absently down at the rock and tensely flicked her tail, trying not to let her ears droop with defeat. At the very least, she didn’t want to show how hopeless she felt. There was no reason to feel discouraged anyway. Whatever danger her Dream had been trying to warn her about didn’t seem too urgent, so she would probably be safe for a while...hopefully. Forcefully reminding herself of that fact, she glanced up at the pool of water beneath the roaring waterfall a few paces away from her, hearing the crash of the water even more loudly in the silence. With a faint frown, she cast a quick glance back at Dash and Jeb, then rose to her paws and leapt off the top of the rock in one smooth movement. The instant she landed in the wild, tall grass, she flicked her tail and started to wade through the undergrowth.

“I’m going to get a drink of water from that pool,” she called over her shoulder, feeling her friends’ surprised eyes boring into her back. “You guys think it over for a bit and see if you can come up with anything.”

Dash and Jeb just nodded and looked down at their paws, seeming to sink deep into their thoughts as they struggled to search for any answers or meanings to her strange Dream.

Letting out a soft sigh, Saderia turned around to look up at the rushing waterfall right in front of her. With a faint smile, she waded through the grass until she reached the edge of the wide, rippling pool beneath the pounding water. Ignoring the spray from the waterfall, she bent down and lowered her head to lap at the cool, sparkling water. The instant the water touched her tongue, though, she immediately drew back with a gasp, spitting out the water and trying not to cringe. “Gross!”

From where he sat on the rock behind her, Dash looked up with a frown. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s salty!” Curling her lip in disgust, Saderia scowled down at the water, shaking the droplets from her muzzle. Her eyes shone with disbelief. She would have never expected the sparkling lake to taste so disgustingly salty. A strange, almost metallic taste tinged the sparkling waters. In a way, it tasted almost like...blood. Shaking her head in disgust, she stared down at her reflection in the sparkling waters, then froze.

Without warning, her reflection in the shimmering waters turned dark as a cloud moved over the sun. At the same time, a strange, eerie sensation suddenly stabbed into the back of her neck, setting her fur on fire and making her skin prickle with discomfort. Her heart skipped a beat. With a soft gasp, she whipped around and turned to scan the clearing around her with wide, stunned eyes, not knowing what she was looking for. Her ears twitched with unease. With a strange, tingling sensation, her skin began to crawl and odd, fiery chills raced down her spine. All the hair on her back stood on end. Somehow, it almost felt as if...she were being watched.

“Saderia?” Breaking Saderia out of her tense thoughts, Dash looked up at her with a worried frown. “Something wrong?”

Blinking several times, Saderia cast a quick glance at him, then turned to stare out at the vast valley one final time. With narrowed eyes, she scanned the thick grass, the rocks lining the sides of the waterfall, and the lush trees and undergrowth dotting the ridges all around her, searching for any sign of someone watching her. She saw nothing. After what felt like ages, the sensation slowly began to fade, leaving her with nothing but a tense, eerie feeling that something was off.

“Nothing’s wrong,” she murmured in a slow, tense voice. Frowning, she glanced up at the sky and blinked in surprise when she realized the sun had just begun to sink closer to the horizon, casting dying orange rays out across the valley. “But it is getting late...” Her eyes narrowed with unease. “We should probably go home before it gets dark.”

While Jeb looked around in surprise, Dash glanced up at the sky and just shrugged. “If you say so.” With the tiny kraguer close behind him, the dark lion leapt off the stone and waded through the thick grass to join her, forging a path for Jeb to follow.

Side by side, Saderia and her friends turned to leap back up the slippery rocks on the side of the waterfall. Finding herself moving faster, Saderia flew up the rocks as fast as she could, unconsciously wanting to get away. The instant she reached the top of the cliff, she turned to dart toward the woods as quickly as she could without looking suspicious. Even so, when she turned to look up at the dark woods, her heart skipped with an instinctual jolt of unease. Despite the fact that the enclosing woods no longer seemed as scary and confusing, some part of her still didn’t want to go in them.

Forcing herself to pick up her pace, she darted toward the woods with her friends close behind her, shaking off her fear. A second after she dove into the dark, shadowy woods, she cast a glance back through the trees at the river rushing toward the waterfall and felt her heart skip a beat. In a split second, she thought she saw a shadow flit across the water, so fast she almost missed it. Or maybe it was just her imagination...

With dull, unfocused amber eyes, Saderia gazed down at the rippling pool of water below the rushing waterfall, absently studying her shimmering reflection and listening to the roar of the racing water. Without warning, a dark shadow suddenly loomed up behind her, reflecting pure black in the shimmering waters. Her heart skipped a beat. With a gasp, Saderia tried to whip around to see who was behind her, but couldn’t move. Frozen to the spot, she could only watch as a paw with thick, glistening claws snaked out from behind her and clutched the throat of her reflection. She herself felt nothing but fear.

A scream tore out of her throat. Right before her eyes, thick red blood blossomed up from her reflection and spilled out into the rippling

water, tainting the shimmering pool with gore. The entire pond turned red with blood. The rushing waterfall roared with fury as its bright, crystalline waters turned a dark, angry red. Shadows swirled through its thick crimson waters like a tornado, hissing and cackling in wild, sinister voices.

“Beware an old enemy,” they whispered. “Beware, Daughter...”

“*You’ll be just another pawn in my games...*” A cruel, achingly familiar voice hissed through the air around her as the bright blood red waterfall turned to black.

“*History only tells you what it wants you to know...*” An old, ominous voice whispered out beneath the soft cackling of the shadows, sending shivers down her spine.

The erratic fluttering of turning pages whispered through the air as the shadows flew out from the waterfall, chanting and cackling at the tops of their lungs. Before Saderia could even scream, the shadows swooped toward her and flew around her in a wild swirl of black, turning the entire world around her to darkness.

Flashes of memories seemed to jump out from the blackness all around her, flickering through her mind like the glowing eyes of the shadows. In an instant, she saw herself stumbling across the cold, dark stone floor of Tarae’s tomb, desperately fighting Dastarius for the scroll. Words flashed before her eyes. ‘*The Daughter of the Fiftieth Generation...*’ An instant later, she saw Dash sitting at the back of class, hiding his face from her in fear. The pages turning in the background seemed to flutter faster and faster as her life flashed before her eyes. Her school days, the desert, Dingo, the strange forest, Jeb, the spirit realm, Claw, the war...the fighting!

Jeb’s innocent words rang in her ears, seeming oddly sinister in the darkness. “*I would have never thought there was all this stuff going on in the background.*” At the same time, the same eerie voice echoed through her own mind in time with the frantic turning of pages. “*History only tells you what it wants you to know...*”

Squeezing her eyes shut, Saderia struggled to push away the violent, torrid images flashing through her mind, but no matter how hard she tried, the scenes kept flashing before her eyes, faster and faster until she could barely tell them apart. With a shrill scream, she fell down through the

darkness as the shadows swirled around her, laughing merrily at the sight of her fear.

“Beware, Daughter,” they chuckled. “Beware.”

Tense paws gripped Saderia’s shoulders and shook her quickly, jolting her awake. With a sharp cry, Saderia snapped her eyes open and shot upward, her heart pounding and her fur bristling with terror. Her breath left her in a wild gasp. Panting for air, she pushed herself upward as fast as she could, shoving the paws away from her.

“Saderia!” An urgent voice hissed right next to her ear, sounding oddly far away. “Saderia, calm down!”

With a shaky gasp, Saderia looked up in shock at the soft voice and almost jumped when her eyes suddenly snapped into focus. Hardly daring to breathe, she froze on her bed and stared up at the tiger standing over her with wide eyes, barely noticing the darkness of her shadowy room around her. Her mother stood right beside her bed, gazing down at her with tense, worried amber eyes and a nervous frown. Catching Saderia’s gaze, she nervously flicked her tail, unable to hide her concern.

Blinking several times, Saderia stared up at her mother in surprise, then slowly looked down and forced herself to let out a long, shaky sigh, trying to push away her fear. “M-Mom...What...What are you doing here?”

Karenisha narrowed her eyes and studied her quietly, her eyes tense with worry. “I came to wake you up for school, but you were tossing and turning in your sleep. I thought you were having a nightmare. I had to wake you up somehow.”

Saderia let out a long sigh and slowly turned to gaze around at her room, her heart reluctantly beginning to slow. Relief tingled in her chest when she glanced back over her shoulder and saw a glimmer of dawn light streaming in through her window. All night, she had been trying to fall asleep, but each time she had slipped into unconsciousness, she had woken up seconds later, tormented by horrible nightmares. The two or three hours of sleep she had managed to get was better than what she had grown used to lately, but still not great.

Taking a deep breath, she looked up at her mother and let out a long, soft sigh. “Thanks, Mom. I...I needed to be woken up. That nightmare...” She trailed off with a wince.

“It seemed bad.” Narrowing her eyes, Karenisha studied her closely, then lowered her voice to a soft whisper. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Saderia quickly shook her head and looked away. “No...I’ll be fine.” With a sigh, she started to slip out of her bed, but her mother stopped her.

Karenisha’s dark amber eyes bored into hers, gleaming with seriousness. “Was it...a Dream?”

Saderia paused and looked up at her in surprise. With narrowed eyes, she studied her uncertainly for a long moment before tensely looking away. “It might have been, but...I’ll have to think about it some more.”

Karenisha just nodded and slowly backed away. For a long moment, she remained silent, then let out a sigh and wearily looked up to meet her gaze, her eyes sad. “You can talk to me about your Dreams if you need to, Saderia. I’m not going to let them get to me like last time. I’m your mother. You can talk to me about anything. I’m supposed to protect you. Not the other way around.”

Saderia frowned and started to reassure her that she was fine, then stopped. With uneasy amber eyes, she looked up at her mother and hesitated for a long time, then slowly narrowed her eyes, her heart beating faster with determination. “Actually, Mom...it probably was a Dream. But...it’s really complicated, and I think it would be better for me to talk to Dash about it. But...” She trailed off and hesitated for a long moment, then took a deep breath, forcing herself not to chicken out. “There are some other things I want to tell you—things I’ve been meaning to tell you for a long time. I...I haven’t been fair to you, Mom. You’re a lot stronger now. And...there are some things you ought to know.”

Karenisha blinked in surprise, then slowly sat back, indicating for her to continue. With a heavy heart, Saderia made herself face her and slowly began to explain how Dash had been meeting with Dastarius during the war. Making sure to describe everything that had happened as carefully as possible, she spoke in a tone as even as she could make it, trying to hide her unease. As she spoke, her mother’s eyes darkened and a grave shadow crossed her face. Understanding seemed to dawn on her. When Saderia finally finished describing everything, Karenisha remained silent, deep in thought.

After a few moments of silence, Saderia took a deep breath. “Mom? Are you okay?”

Her mother nodded slowly, then paused. After a few moments of silence, she slowly turned to meet Saderia’s gaze, her eyes dark and grim. “Your father told me about your ability to see ghosts, and I suppose it’s not too hard to believe that if you can see them, your friends can, too. But... after all this time...even now that he’s dead...Dastarius has come back to haunt us?”

Saderia let out a long breath. “It seems like it. I was shocked, too, when I first found out, but...it’s something I’ve reluctantly grown used to. I mean, I never thought I’d ever have to deal with Dastarius again, but now that this has happened...there’s nothing I can do but keep going and try not to let him get to me.” She hesitated, then leaned forward and rested her paw firmly on her mother’s shoulder. “We outsmarted him once,” she whispered. “We can do it again. Dastarius’s plan to use Dash failed, and he knows that. As far as I know, Dash was his only connection to our world, so now that that’s over, there’s not much he can do to hurt us. He probably won’t give up—Dastarius never gives up—but as far as I’m concerned, he can scheme and curse us all he wants. He still can’t do anything to us if he doesn’t have that connection to the real world.”

Karenisha narrowed her eyes in thought and remained silent for a tense moment, then managed a faint smile. “Yes, I suppose you’re right.” With a slight shrug of her shoulders, she just flicked her tail and sighed. “I’m sure Dash won’t make that mistake again, so it probably isn’t anything to worry about.”

Saderia blinked and looked up at her in shock, stunned that she had decided to trust him so quickly after learning what he had done. “You really think so? After you just found all this out...you really think Dash won’t do this again?”

Karenisha nodded with a faint, knowing smile. “Nobody’s perfect, Saderia. You and I fell for Dastarius’s act once upon a time, as well. I’ve been acting as Dash’s mother for almost as long as I’ve been yours, considering we were separated for so long. I know Dash is a good animal deep down, and I know he makes mistakes just like the rest of us. Some of the things that happened in the war make more sense now, and I realize that some of the bad things that happened to me were partially because of Dash,

but I can forgive him because I know that even if he was listening to Dastarius, he still had good intentions. As far as I'm concerned, that's the only thing that matters."

Saderia blinked in surprise, then managed a weak smile. "I...I guess you're right. It's taken me a while to trust Dash again, but...you're probably right." She gave her a sheepish shrug. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you all of this sooner."

"That's all right." Karenisha waved her worries away with a warm flick of her tail. "I'm glad you told me now, at least." She paused, then gave her a faint smile. "I'm glad I understand now. I'm sorry that these worries had to trouble you for so long, Saderia. I wish I could have helped and I wish I could be more help now, but I know that whatever happens, you'll be able to handle it just like you've handled everything else that's been thrown at you. You're strong enough to face anything that may happen in the future, and I know you'll do what's right."

Saderia looked up at her in surprise and hesitated, then smiled a bright, hopeful smile. "Thanks, Mom. I...I think I needed that. That helps more than anything has these past few weeks. Thank you."

Saderia darted hastily down the crowded hallway of her school with her friends close behind her, hurrying to make it to her classroom. Her tail waved confidently through the air with every step and she held her head high, feeling braver and stronger than she had in ages. With her friends close behind her, she dodged in and out of crowds of students, hurrying to make it to her first class.

Struggling to keep up with her, Dash looked up as they bounded down the long hallway, a curious gleam in his eyes. "Did you have another Dream last night?"

While Jeb looked up at her with curious blue/green eyes, Saderia nodded with a tight smile. "Yeah. We can talk about it later at the club. I doubt it'll help us learn much, but...we can at least try to figure it out. I'm sure we'll eventually find some way to understand it."

"I hope so." Jeb tried to suppress a shiver. "Your Dreams are really creepy!"

"That, they are." Biting back a sigh, Saderia looked up at the hallway ahead of her and tried not to wince. "But I'm sure we'll figure out

some way to deal with whatever they're trying to predict." She opened her mouth to say more to reassure her friends, but broke off. Before she could say a word, a bright, friendly voice rang out over the soft chatter in the hallway.

"Hey, Saderia!"

With her friends right behind her, Saderia paused and whirled around in surprise. The instant she looked back, a quick streak of tawny, spotted fur shot out from behind a crowd of chattering students. With a wide, haughty/friendly grin on her face, Loki skidded to a stop just in front of Saderia and her friends and eagerly flicked her tail, her eyes shining with warmth.

"What's up?" Glancing curiously back and forth between Saderia and Dash, Loki eyed them for a second, then grinned. "Call me crazy, but ever since that thing with Tawny and Bunny, you two seem to be getting along a lot better."

Saderia beamed back at her. "Hey, Loki. You're right. Dash and I are getting along a lot better." With a sheepish grin, she just shrugged. "I guess you were right all along for trying to get us to make up. Thanks."

Loki just flicked her tail to wave away her thanks. "I didn't do anything. But I will tell Tawny you said thanks for being stupid and getting lost so you guys could make up."

Saderia giggled and rolled her eyes. "You do that." With a wide grin, she turned around and started to pad back down the hallway, leading the way to Ms. Spot's classroom.

Loki instantly fell into step beside her and her friends and grinned. With shining eyes, she gazed absently around at the hallway and made a face at the L's when they sneered at her from across the hall, trying to hide a snicker. "So everything's back to normal now, huh?"

Saderia just nodded happily. "Pretty much." Her eyes glowed with excitement. "I'm glad things are finally settling down again. Aren't you?" she added, glancing at Dash and Jeb.

When her two friends nodded heartily, Loki snickered and raised an eyebrow. "Yeah, I bet." Casting a glance at Jeb, she flicked him lightly with her tail and grinned. "What about you, Jeb? You're probably relieved. It must have gotten annoying having to deal with all that thick air around these two."

Jeb grinned and slowly shook his head. “Yeah, it was...weird. I hated that.”

Loki let out a bright laugh and just shook her head, while the others grinned. Side by side, the four of them strolled down the crowded hallway toward their classroom where Ms. Spot would just be starting class. With a bright smile, Saderia gazed around at her three friends and slowly shook her head, realizing just how great it was now that things were finally starting to return to the way they used to be. Things were finally starting to feel normal again.

Even so, Saderia couldn’t wait until school ended and she and her friends made it to the valley. She wanted nothing more than to figure out what her Dream meant and try to prepare herself for whatever the future was about to throw at her. No matter what it was she might have to face, she was determined not to let it destroy her and her friends. Not again.

Memories of the Dream swirled through Saderia’s mind. So lost in her thoughts, she barely paid attention as she leapt down the side of the cliff next to the roaring waterfall into the valley of Club Paradise. Dash and Jeb bounded down the sleek, wet stones ahead of her and stumbled out into the thick grass in a flash. Caught up in memories of her Dream, Saderia practically tumbled down the last few rocks and half-fell onto the grass at the bottom of the valley. With shining amber eyes, she clumsily caught her fall and dusted herself off. Signaling for her friends to follow her, she started to dart toward the huge stone rising up in the center of the valley, then froze when her eyes caught on something else.

Pausing in the tall grass, Saderia looked to the right of the waterfall and hesitated, then quickly turned around and darted in the opposite direction of the flat stones toward the pond again. “You guys go ahead and go to the rocks,” she called over her shoulder. “I’ll be right there! I just want to look at something first...”

While Dash and Jeb just shrugged and turned to pad toward the rocks, Saderia turned around and hastily darted away. With curious amber eyes, she padded toward a dense thicket of bushes and grasses tangled together near the bottom of one of the ridges just a few paces to the right of the pool of water beneath the waterfall. Hidden amongst the thick undergrowth were several small, perfectly rectangular stone slabs jutting up

out of the dirt. Nosing her way through the tall grass, Saderia paused when she stood just in front of the strange stones and leaned down to study them with curious eyes, her tail swishing excitedly through the undergrowth.

Just like the stone on the ridges at the back of the lake that eventually turned into the waterfall, these stones were perfectly rectangular and rounded at the top, as if someone had shaped them that way. Apart from a few cracks from the weathering of time, the surfaces of the pale gray stones were oddly smooth. What stuck out to her the most were the strange, faded letters carved across the stones. Like the writing on the walls of the room in the cave and the other rectangular stone above the waterfall, the inscriptions were just as indecipherable and confusing. As if it would help her understand, Saderia ran a paw across the strange letters, but the unreadable words remained as mysterious as ever.

Saderia studied them for a long moment, longing to understand but knowing she couldn't. With a long sigh, she dropped her paw and reluctantly turned around to pad back toward her friends, knowing that staring at the stones would do no good. Even as she walked away from the stones, though, the odd inscriptions weighed heavily on her mind. What could they possibly mean? Was it some kind of different language? Some kind of code?

Absently leaping up onto the tall, smooth rock in the center of the valley before her friends, Saderia turned the odd inscriptions over and over in her mind, unable to stop thinking about them. If she could decipher the words, what kinds of stories would they tell? Would they describe an animal from long, long ago in an ancient world, or would they tell a tale of a more modern animal who had found the valley and turned it into their own secret hideout like Saderia and her friends?

With a distracted frown, Saderia looked up to gaze at the vast valley around her, then froze. Without warning, an odd prickling sensation suddenly shivered through her fur, making her skin crawl with unease. The fur on the back of her neck stood up in alarm and a shiver of discomfort shot through her. Barely biting back a gasp, she gazed around at the valley out of the corner of her eye to search for some hidden enemy lurking in the bushes, but all she saw were Dash and Jeb staring back at her and no one else. A dark frown crossed her face.

Forcefully shaking off the eerie premonition, she turned back to face her friends with a distracted frown and slowly started to describe her Dream. Even as she dove back into the memories of the terrifying nightmare, though, her mind turned back to the strange, rectangular stones and spun with wonder and unease. Whoever had carved those words across the stones—had they ever gotten the strange, chilling feeling of being watched?

Had they felt the same way she did now?

Chapter Eighteen

Beware

“Didn’t you hear those words in your other Dream?” As soon as Saderia finished describing her nightmare, Dash looked up at her with wide, curious amber eyes. “About...being a pawn? Didn’t you say you thought the voice sounded familiar in your Dream?”

Saderia nodded slowly, lost in thought. “Yes. But I can’t quite put my paw on it...I don’t remember who that voice belongs to, so don’t get your hopes up...”

Jeb frowned and looked up with narrowed, bewildered eyes. “What did it mean when that voice said that thing about history? Didn’t it say, ‘History only tells you what it wants you to know’? What does that mean?”

Saderia shrugged absently. “I’m not sure exactly what it means and what context it was in...but I think in a way, it kind of relates to the way things happened in the war. Do you remember how surprised you were when I told you what was going on behind the scenes with Dash and Dastarius, Jeb? You were shocked that all those things had happened during the war without you knowing about any of them. I think that’s kind of what the voice means. Sometimes ‘history’ doesn’t tell you everything because there are some parts of it that the ones who experienced it don’t want others to know. As it is, you, Dash, Dingo, and Mom are the only ones who even know that Dastarius is still lurking around in the spirit realm and that he visited Dash during the war. Animals are probably already writing about the war for future history books, but none of them will ever mention Dastarius’s role in the war because we want to keep that a secret. Make sense?”

Jeb blinked in surprise, then looked down and nodded slowly. “I guess so. But what ‘history’ was the Dream referring to? Was there maybe something else in the war that even you don’t know about?”

Saderia frowned and tensely flicked her tail. “I don’t think so. Now that I know about Dastarius, everything else about the war makes sense. Before I knew the whole story about Dastarius’s plots and interference,

there were major inconsistencies in the war that needed explaining. Now there aren't. There are no loose ends. Besides, the scenes I saw after that weren't just memories of the war. There were a lot of visions that flashed before my eyes after that voice said that thing about history. In fact...I think the visions more or less played out my entire life!"

Dash narrowed his eyes in a bewildered frown. "That's really weird. Do you think there's something in *your* history that you don't know about?"

Saderia shrugged and slowly shook her head, her eyes dark with unease. "I'm not sure. It seems like everything else that has happened to me has had an explanation so far. Back when we first became friends, Dash, you explained what happened between you and your father and told me it was you who had saved me from Dastarius's dungeon and helped me save my parents. When we got lost in the desert, Dingo explained the pack to us and told us everything that had been going on there with Bone. Later on, when I met Claw, she explained 'special' animals who could see spirits to me and told me that she had been watching me and had decided to be my guide. When I met Jeb, he explained why the kraguers had been doing the things they had been doing to drive us out, and later on, Dingo even explained where the forest had come from. The war's even explained now that you've told me everything, Dash." She paused and narrowed her eyes in thought, then frowned, a dark shadow creeping across her face. For a long moment, she remained silent, then slowly looked down at her paws, deep in thought. "I think the only things that have been left without explanations...are the Dreams I have...and the prophecy..."

When Dash and Jeb snapped up to look at her in shock and bewilderment, she nervously met their eyes and tensely shuffled her paws. "I mean...where did they come from? The Dreams run in my family...but how and why did my oldest traceable ancestor, Queen Tarae, start having Dreams to begin with? And how did she write that prophecy? How did she know that thousands of years later, I would do all those things she said?" Curiosity washed over her like a wave and her eyes narrowed with a dark, mystified glint. "The Dreams and the prophecy are probably the most mysterious things in my life. They've never had any real explanation, and I don't expect that to change anytime soon—I've more or less just gotten used to them and stopped caring about an explanation. But if there's

anything in my life that I'm not quite sure about, it's those Dreams and that strange prophecy I read so long ago."

Dash frowned. "I've never really thought about it that way either. It's just one of those things that was just...normal. I didn't think it needed an explanation—I just got used to it."

Jeb shrugged thoughtfully. "Me too. I mean, I was already used to the supernatural since we had the Sight Pond back in my forest where the Emperor could kind of see the future, so I never really thought about it."

"I wonder if Dingo thought about it at all," Saderia murmured, narrowing her eyes in thought and trying not to wince when she realized she couldn't just ask him herself now that he lived so far away.

Dash just shrugged. "He probably thought it was weird, but I doubt he really cared or wondered about it at all. Dingoes don't know anything about that supernatural stuff. He probably decided not to question it and just got used to it like the rest of us."

Saderia let out a weary sigh. "Well, either way, it really doesn't matter, I guess. The Dream I had last night was even vaguer than the last one, and I doubt we're going to figure anything out about my Dreams or the prophecy. I say we drop it for now."

Dash lowered his eyes to the ground and let out a soft sigh. "I guess that's probably best."

"Yeah..." Jeb glanced down at his paws and nervously flattened his ears. "All this Dream/future stuff really confuses me."

Saderia looked down at her paws and bit back a regretful sigh. "Yeah, me too." She paused and started to say more, then broke off. A sudden icy sensation of unease shot down her spine, raising all the fur along her back and setting her heart aflame. Barely suppressing a gasp, she whipped around on the rock and hastily scanned her surroundings, but saw nothing. Even so, the lingering feeling of being watched never seemed to fade away.

Nervously, Saderia gritted her teeth and looked down at her paws. Tense and self-conscious, she hastily leapt down from the rock and dove into the grass, feeling oddly relieved when the thick stalks rose up over her head and hid her from sight. Without looking back, she instantly turned to dart back toward the waterfall, flicking her tail at her friends to signal for

them to follow. “Come on, guys! Let’s go home! We’re not getting anywhere, and it’s getting late!”

When her friends merely shrugged and leapt to their paws to follow her, she turned and led the way toward the waterfall. As fast as she could, she scaled the sleek rocks on the side of the cliff, wanting nothing more than to get away. With her friends close beside her, she turned to race into the deep, dark woods leading away from the valley, her heart still pounding with unease. Right before she plunged into the shadows of the woods, she cast one last nervous glance back at the valley and felt her heart skip.

A few last dying rays of reddish orange sunlight shot out across the sky and filtered down through the canopy, shining down on the waterfall. Right before her eyes, the dying light fell across the waterfall, coloring the crystalline waters a dark, angry red. Just like in her Dream.

Unease shimmered in Claw’s wide light brown eyes. gingerly, she padded across the vast desert sand, her eyes flicking wildly back and forth and scanning her otherworldly surroundings. The ghostly land around her was empty apart from a dark, threatening blue glow haunting the sand dunes that seemed to grow darker and darker with each step. Glancing over her shoulder, she took a shaky breath and forced herself to keep moving, venturing deeper into the spirit realm to places she had never been before. Her short brown tail twitched with nervousness. Swallowing back her fear, she made herself keep moving, searching for any sign of Dastarius’s dark, translucent form.

A low growl of frustration rumbled in her throat. Where had the dark spirit gone now? Somehow, he had managed to slip away from her without her realizing it, and now she couldn’t find him again. That was a bad thing. Maybe Dastarius was right with his constant cracks about her nosiness, but she had a right to snoop around when it came to him. He was up to something, and she had to know what. If something happened to Saderia and her friends because of him, Claw would never forgive herself—especially knowing that she could have done something to stop him.

She was almost certain Dastarius had snuck away to some part of the spirit world’s version of the desert, but where *exactly* was something she didn’t know. Even in the land of the dead, the desert was vast, making it next to impossible to find anybody in it. A soft sigh escaped her throat.

Claw loved the desert, but even she had to admit that that particular aspect of it was annoyingly inconvenient.

Her mind whirled as she stumbled through the dark, ghostly dunes, searching for any sign of the evil spirit. What could he possibly be up to now? And why did he seem so interested in the desert? First, she had seen him in that strange, eerie place speaking to his ancestor. Next, she had seen him in the desert standing over her brother's grave. Where was the connection? How were those two things related? And just what did Dastarius hope to gain from sneaking around in all of these strange places? Did he already have a plan, or was he simply trying to make one?

None of it made any sense. The eerie spirit's erratic behavior weighed heavily on Claw's mind as she wandered through the dunes, continuing her search. With a long sigh, she paused in the middle of the vast desert and felt her ears droop with defeat as she stared out at the empty sand. Hopelessness glowed in her eyes. In the back of her mind, she knew it was useless to continue searching when she had no idea which direction Dastarius had gone and no concept of where he might be. Finding him was close to impossible. A growl rumbled in her throat. Lashing her tail in irritation, she glared out at the desert, realizing for the first time that he had finally managed to give her the slip. Wherever he was, he was probably laughing about it, too.

With a weary sigh, Claw reluctantly sat back and gazed darkly out at the desert, lost in thought. Vaguely, she wondered what Saderia and her friends had been doing in her absence and felt a twinge of guilt when she realized she hadn't been watching them much at all lately, having been too busy following Dastarius. She hoped they hadn't needed her help. Tensely flicking her tail, she shook the guilty thoughts out of her head and forced herself to her paws, determined not to give up. Whatever problems Saderia and her friends might have, they probably wouldn't need her help. Keeping the thought in mind, she gazed out at the vast desert around her and took a step forward, determined to find Dastarius.

Lightning flashed overhead with a deafening crash, sending Saderia's heart racing with fear. With a gasp, she forced her eyes open into a dark void of shadows. All around her, the sound of pounding rain whispered through the darkness, splashing in time with her racing heart.

Soft voices hissed in the shadows through the onslaught of crashing thunder and pounding rain.

“You’ll be just another pawn in my games...”

“Kill her!”

Thunder and rain pounded in her ears, but as she watched, the darkness slowly started to fade away into a vast desert wasteland. Screams rang out through the shadows around her, setting her heart on fire with fear. The desert spread out before her eyes, burning under the blazing sun and streaked with dark splotches of blood. Dingoes and forest animals alike tumbled across the bloody ground, screaming at the tops of their lungs and fighting to get the upper hand. The scent of blood rose thickly in the air, inescapable. Above the hordes of fighting animals, a dark, menacing ledge towered in the sky. With wide eyes, Saderia looked up at the ledge and felt her heart skip with terror.

A small orange figure dangled helplessly from the edge of the ledge, scrabbling desperately at the craggy rocks to pull herself up. On the platform above her, a dark, shadowy figure leered down at her and the fighting animals below, his bright amber eyes flashing in the darkness. The rain roaring in the background suddenly boomed in her ears, louder than ever. The scene before her blurred for a split second, then cleared again, making her heart stop in her chest.

Dark, bloody rain suddenly poured down from the pitch black sky over the desert, splattering the sand dunes with gore and pounding down on the heads of the fighting animals. A horrifying ocean of blood slowly began to rise up around the desert, swallowing the sand dunes and dragging the fighting animals down to its depths. The sticky gore tickled at Saderia’s own legs, threatening to pull her down. With wide, horrified eyes, she watched as the lake of blood rose up higher and higher, drowning everyone it touched.

Her own words echoed in her ears, but they sounded hollow and faraway, broken and cracked. “*We outsmarted him once...We can do it again...*”

Her entire body felt suddenly numb with fear and hopelessness as her words echoed through her mind, sounding empty and lifeless in the wild roaring of the rain. Slowly, her own body began to sink beneath the pool of blood as the screams and snarls of the fighters rang in her ears. Just before

her head slipped under the gore, a wild, terrified scream tore out of her mouth and rang in the air, nothing more than another crash of thunder in the rain.

“Saderia!”

With a sharp gasp, Saderia jolted upward in bed, her sides heaving and her heart racing with fear. Taking in deep gulps of air, she whipped wildly back and forth to look around and froze when her dark surroundings slowly crept into view. The dark, shadowy room around her slowly appeared before her eyes, illuminated by the faint glow of morning sunlight beginning to seep in through the window. Nothing leered out at her from the shadows. The screams and the pounding of the rain had vanished with her nightmare, leaving nothing but silence hanging over her tense, shadowy room. Her breath caught, but her heart gradually began to slow as reality swam back into view.

“Saderia?”

At the sound of the soft voice, Saderia instantly snapped around and froze.

Dash stood right beside her bed, gazing at her with tense, worried amber eyes. When her gaze met his, he frowned and tensely flicked his tail, his expression shadowed with concern. Slowly, he stepped closer to her bed and cautiously met her eyes. “Saderia? Are you okay?”

Saderia blinked several times in surprise, then slowly turned to look down at her paws, her mind spinning with memories of her nightmare. As the thoughts swirled through her mind, she almost shuddered. She didn’t say a word.

Dash nervously narrowed his eyes, his voice dropping to a whisper. “What was that about? I...I heard you screaming from my room. Did...Did you have a Dream?”

Saderia winced and frowned as she thought back to her nightmare. With narrowed eyes, she gazed out at the darkness and slowly shook her head. “I don’t think so...It was more of a nightmare than a Dream.”

Dash blinked in surprise, then uncomfortably looked away. “About...the war?”

Saderia wrinkled her nose and scowled. “Kind of. It wasn’t just about the war, though. I...I think I just had a nightmare about my Dreams!”

Dash blinked and looked up at her in surprise. “Really?”

Saderia shook her head and let out a weary sigh. “This is getting ridiculous.”

Dash snickered and tried to hide a grin. When Saderia shot him a withering glare, he sheepishly shrugged his shoulders and tried not to smile. “Sorry...but it is kind of funny.”

Saderia shot him a dark glare, then just rolled her eyes, unable to hide a smile. “Yeah, I guess you’re right.” Letting out a soft sigh, she gazed out at her room and bit back a giggle even as worry gleamed in her eyes. Even through her good humor, she wondered if she would ever get a good night’s sleep again.

Dash let out a soft breath and gently rested his tail against her shoulder, seeming to sense her distress. “The nightmares will go away eventually,” he murmured. “This is the first one in a long time, right?”

“Yeah.” Saderia rolled her eyes and scowled. “But that’s only because their usual slot has been filled by Dreams.”

Dash managed a slight smile when she chuckled lightly in exasperation. “Well, we already know the Dreams go away...at least for a while. So maybe when all of this is over, you’ll be able to sleep.”

Saderia managed a weak, hopeful smile. “I can hope...” Breaking off, she let out a quiet yawn and bit back a sigh. “I guess I should try to get back to sleep, huh?”

Dash nodded with a gentle smile. “You should try to get some rest. You’ve been missing a lot of sleep lately.” Giving her a gentle flick of his tail, he slowly turned around and padded back toward the door. Just before he slipped through the crack in the open doorway and disappeared into the darkness of the hallway, he turned around and gave her one last smile. “Goodnight, Saderia.”

Golden afternoon sunlight shimmered down through the thick canopy in the woods, shining a bright light across the small pond in the middle of the clearing. With a shaky breath, Saderia stumbled out through a copse of thick trees and staggered out of the dense, enclosing woods leading to Club Paradise. Dash and Jeb staggered out behind her, gasping for breath after their frantic run through the woods. Taking in quick gasps of air, Saderia stumbled to a stop on the wild grass covering the wide clearing and

slowly turned to look up at the pond in front of her, her eyes clouding with exhaustion.

After leaving school an hour or so earlier, she, Dash, and Jeb had raced through the woods to make it to their hideout as fast as they could. The whole way to the clubhouse, Saderia had felt oddly restless. It was almost as if she was expecting something to happen—even if she didn’t know what. A strange, paranoid feeling had seemed to haunt her the entire day and had only grown stronger with every step she had taken through the enclosing woods. As she stepped out into the wide clearing in front of the trickling pond, her unease seemed to grow even stronger. Something was off. She just didn’t know what it was.

“Hey, is it okay if we rest here for a minute?” With a tense frown, Saderia looked back just as her friends stumbled to a stop behind her. “I’m kind of tired today.”

When Dash and Jeb just shrugged and sat back on the thick grass to catch their breath, Saderia turned to look back at the pond and frowned. Curiosity stirred in her chest, along with a dark, uneasy premonition. Narrowing her eyes, she hesitated for half a second, then carefully stepped away from her friends and turned to creep toward the gurgling lake in the center of the clearing.

The instant she stepped up to the side of the river, her eyes snapped to the strange, rectangular stone standing up on the middle ridge at the back of the pond. Her eyes narrowed. After casting a quick glance back at her friends, she paused, then hastily slipped into the rushing water, ignoring its icy touch. Barely noticing the water rushing around her, she waded to the back of the pond and stopped when she stood in front of the small ridges rising up at the back. With a tense frown, she leaned down close to the stone to study it once more.

Narrowing her eyes, she studied the strange letters scattered across the stone from top to bottom, trying to work out some meaning from them. Faded and illegible in most places, the ancient letters were small and squished together to make room for the whole phrase—whatever it was. Carefully, Saderia studied each letter on the stone as intently as she could, struggling to find any patterns she recognized. No matter how hard she looked, though, she couldn’t work out any meaning from the letters. As she stared at the long stone, the fur along her back slowly began to bristle. An

icy sensation streaked down her spine, making her heart beat faster with unease. The faint feeling of being watched seemed to burn into her fur from all directions, making her skin crawl.

Feeling her paws tense beneath the water, Saderia cast a quick, discreet glance over her shoulder and frowned when she saw nothing behind her. Trying to shake off the eerie sensation, she slowly turned to look back at the stone, her eyes intent on the strange marks. A few steps away, Dash and Jeb watched her in bewilderment, but she ignored their perplexed stares. For a long moment, she studied the faded letters at the top of the stone as hard as she could, then let out a soft sigh, knowing it was useless. Her gaze wandered down the rest of the stone, then stopped at the very bottom where a few barely readable letters had been carved into the rock and hidden beneath a patch of rising grass.

A deep frown crossed her face. Hardly daring to breathe, Saderia leaned closer and studied the strange marks on the very bottom of the rock, struggling to make out the cracked, faded letters. Slowly, the first two letters began to take on a more recognizable shape as she studied them. Feeling her heart skip and her eyes widen in surprise, she gazed down at the old writing intently, struggling to make out the rest of the letters. Her tail started to lash wildly back and forth through the water and her heart beat faster with excitement as she slowly began to make out the rest of the short phrase inscribed on the bottom of the stone.

When she finally managed to make out the first word, she stumbled back with a gasp, all her fur beginning to bristle. Without daring to look away, she studied the next words with wide eyes and felt her heart skip when they slowly began to make sense. When she managed to decipher the rest of the phrase, she tensed and shakily stumbled backward, her mouth gaping open in shock.

Along the bottom of the stone were several faded letters written in a language she understood, spelling out words she had grown all too familiar with.

Beware an old enemy.

Saderia's eyes widened in horror. With a wild gasp, she stumbled backward through the lake, sending droplets of water flying up all around her. Her heart skipped a beat and her entire body grew cold with shock. Frozen in place, she stared at the evil words, her eyes never leaving the stone.

Dash looked up in shock and hastily took a step toward the riverbank, his eyes wide with alarm. "Saderia? Are you okay? What's wrong?"

Saderia blinked several times, never tearing her eyes off the stone. "N-Nothing," she stammered. "But...w-we should go back home."

Dash blinked in surprise and frowned. "What? Why? We just got here."

"Sorry." With a brisk, curt frown, she shivered and hastily turned to leap out of the river. Shaking off her dripping fur, she stumbled away from the lake, keeping her eyes lowered but still locked on the stone, as if expecting it to attack. "I just...We need to go home. Now."

Jeb looked up at the two of them in surprise, his blue/green eyes bewildered and alarmed. "What's going on?"

With a dark, confused frown, Dash watched Saderia for a tense moment of silence, then turned back to face Jeb. "We're leaving," he called, giving Saderia a lingering, curious glance.

"Something's not right here," Saderia muttered. Tearing her eyes off the stone, she hastily turned to stumble back toward the woods, her heart pounding and her fur bristling with fear. A shiver raced down her spine. "I just need to get back home. I need time to think..."

The soft tinkling of rushing water whispered in Saderia's ears. With a quiet gasp, she opened her eyes and froze. The eerie rectangular stone with the strange words engraved across it seemed to rise up in front of her and tower over her. The eerie letters carved across the rock glittered in a sliver of moonlight, seeming to warp and twist before her eyes. Water lapped all around her, seeming to carry her backward. Frozen in the icy waters, Saderia stared back at the eerie stone with wide eyes, hardly daring to breathe.

Without warning, an eerie sensation stabbed into the back of her neck, sending shivers racing through her icy fur. Her skin crawled with the

creepy sensation of being watched. Hearing her heart pounding in her ears, she gazed out at the darkness around her as the river swept her backward, leaving her unable to move. The wild roar of the waterfall screamed in her ears, growing louder and louder. With a shrill gasp, she flew along the river and opened her mouth in a scream when the water suddenly vanished beneath her. In a flash, she plummeted down through the air, hearing the roar of the waterfall echoing around her.

Her breath caught in her throat. Twisting wildly through the dark, thick air and feeling wind whip past her on all sides, she struggled to look down as she flew alongside the waterfall. When she finally looked down, her heart stopped. Instead of the pool of water in the grassy valley of her secret hideout, sharp, jutting stones rose up from the bottom of a stony hollow, threatening her with their glinting, pointed ends as she hurtled closer and closer. Her mouth opened in a scream.

“Dash, help!”

Pitch black shadows suddenly swooped out from the darkness around her. Cackling and hissing in a chorus of slithering voices, the eerie shadows whisked around her in a swirl of black, following her down. Their delighted laughter rang in her ears.

“Beware, Daughter...”

Saderia let out a scream as she plummeted through the shadows into nothing but never-ending darkness. A second before she squeezed her eyes shut, a memory of the cracked old stone flashed before her eyes. On it, a haunting inscription seemed to shimmer through the darkness a second before the shadows swallowed her up.

Beware an old enemy.

Saderia’s eyes flew open. With a wild, terrified gasp, she shot up in her messy blue bed, her heart pounding and her mind spinning with fear. Her claws dug deep into her messy blanket and her fur bristled wildly with terror. Taking in deep, gasping breaths, she frantically whipped around to scan the darkened bedroom around her, trying desperately to calm the erratic beating of her heart. As the shadows of her room slowly swam into view, the memories of her Dream gradually began to fade away. Slowly, her racing heart began to calm down and her tense muscles began to relax. Her gasping breath gradually returned to normal. Silence fell over the room.

Broken moonlight filtered in through the window, casting bright silver light across her bed. With wide eyes, Saderia slowly turned to look out the window and winced when she saw nothing but darkness outside. Stars shimmered high in the black night sky, casting a faint light over the shadowy forest just outside her window. The moon glowed brightly in the sky. If the sheer darkness haunting her room alone was any indication, morning was a long, long way off. Taking a deep, shaky breath, Saderia stared out at the stars through her window, feeling her heart beat heavily in her chest. As if seeing straight through the darkness to something else entirely, she stared out at the shadows of her room, falling deep into thought.

Memories of her eerie Dream flitted through her mind, sending shivers down her spine. '*Beware an old enemy.*' Which old enemy? And why should she beware them if they were so old? She was pretty sure most, if not all, of her 'old enemies' were dead and no longer that much of a threat. Granted, that hadn't stopped Dastarius...but still. Her eyes darkened at the thought of the dark lion. Out of all of her old enemies, he was the one still determined to get his way. She was almost certain her Dreams had something to do with the evil spirit, but she didn't know what. Dastarius had already made a plan and failed, so what could he possibly be up to now?

With a low groan, she flattened her ears and glared down at her paws, her mind swirling with wild, desperate thoughts. She knew she was getting nowhere, but she couldn't stop wondering about it. Her body ached with exhaustion, but she made herself push it away, too caught up in her thoughts to care. Even though she knew she should try to get back to sleep, she doubted she would be able to or even that she would want to. What she wanted to do was figure out what her Dreams meant...but as always, that was much, much harder than it seemed.

For half a second, she wondered *what* it was she should 'beware' instead of *who* the 'old enemy' might be, but that was just as hopeless. The plans of any one of her old enemies could range anywhere from another ghostly attempt to brainwash one of her friends to a full-scale war. Nothing she had learned from her Dreams or the waking world could help her figure out what was going on. At least, nothing she could see.

A long sigh escaped Saderia's throat. Squeezing her eyes shut, she thought back to the Dream still haunting the back of her mind and shuddered, unable to hide a shiver of fear. Annoyed at herself, she reluctantly opened her eyes and gazed up at the window, her heart burning with anger. As terrifying as the Dream had been, it still irked her that it had scared her, but she couldn't deny that it had.

With a long, weary sigh, she turned to look up at the window, her eyes dark with regret. Slowly, she gazed up at the stars sparkling just outside her home and let out a long breath, forcing herself to relax. With a heavy heart, she stared at the shining stars, pushing the Dream far out of her mind. Absently, she wondered if the Dream would have scared her so badly if she had been with her friends off in some far corner of the earth on some life-changing adventure. Perhaps being trapped in her own home was what made it so difficult to sleep. At home, there was a certain expectation that she should feel safe enough to sleep soundly at night. On a journey far from home, it was much more understandable to have trouble sleeping.

Saderia lowered her eyes to the ground with a heavy sigh. Location probably wasn't the real issue. Whenever she had been on a journey away from home, she had always had her friends close by, ready to calm her down when she woke up from a terrifying Dream. She had had Dash to talk to on her journeys. Now, she just didn't feel right waking him up, knowing he needed his sleep as much as she did.

Her eyes slowly narrowed in the shadows of the night. Forcing off her fear and exhaustion, she looked back up at the stars and flattened her ears, a determined blaze of fire lighting up her amber irises. As the stars twinkled in the black night sky outside her house, she forcefully pushed away her fears and made a silent vow to herself. Tonight, she would get a good night's sleep for the first time in a long time and she would not let her Dreams or her nightmares get to her. Tomorrow, she would find out what was going on at her hideout and see for herself just what this 'old enemy' had in store.

"Keep your eyes peeled." Saderia's eyes flashed through the shadows, blazing with a fiery light of determination. "Watch out for anything strange."

Beside her, Dash looked up with a bewildered frown and curious amber eyes, but merely nodded without a word.

Saderia barely spared a glance at him, too caught up in her own tense thoughts. The two of them stood side by side in the middle of the thick, shadowy woods just outside the valley of Club Paradise. Hundreds of stark, dead trees turned black in the shadows rose up all around them wherever they turned to look. The trees grew so close together Saderia could barely find a place to stand in the dense woods. All around her, the gnarled old trunks grew up side by side, barely an inch away from each other. Wherever a thick tree wasn't growing up from the ground, a jungle of thick, tangled grass slithered up from the earth. Thick patches of bushes and undergrowth that towered high over her own head sprang up between the close trees, seeming to push her back and warn her away.

A thick canopy of leaves towered overhead, blocking out all but the tiniest hints of afternoon sunlight. Black shadows covered the trees and undergrowth, turning them to nothing but darkness. Everything around her was silent. Not even a whisper of wind rustled through the thick woods, as though not even a breeze could slip through the trees. An icy chill seemed to hang over the entire woods, so cold it seeped into Saderia's blood and sent a shiver down her spine. Her fur bristled nervously in the dark woods. Draped in the overwhelming shadows of the gnarled trees and dense undergrowth, she would have thought it was night. The dense forest was as dark and eerie as ever.

Hours earlier, Saderia and Dash had left school and traveled deep into the forest to find their secret hideout. Unfortunately, when they had asked Jeb to come with them, he hadn't been able to. According to him, his parents had wanted him to stay home that day, having grown nervous with his constant comings and goings. Apparently, they were still afraid he was going to run away. With a sad sigh, he had asked them to tell him what happened at the club later the next day, and after they had agreed and said goodbye to Jeb, they had taken off into the forest. Saderia wished he could have been able to come with them, but she wasn't about to let it deter her from exploring the creepy woods.

All day long, Saderia had barely paid attention to school or anything else. All of her thoughts had been focused on the strange valley and the valley alone. The only thing she had wanted to do was make it to the club

with her friends and explore it more thoroughly to find out once and for all what the place was and why it seemed to give her such strange feelings. When school had finally ended, Saderia hadn't been able to get to the woods fast enough.

Already, she and Dash stood in the second stretch of woods between the clearing with the strange, ridged pond and the valley. They had managed to forge their way through the thick woods before it and had left the clearing with the pond far behind to follow the river into the darker, denser woods. In the clearing, Saderia had done her best not to look at the creepy stone on the ridges above the river, and she tried to keep it out of her mind now. Focusing entirely on the task at hand, she stared out over the thick grass and studied the wide, dark woods surrounding her. Determination glimmered in her bright amber eyes.

Beside her, Dash looked up with a tense frown, his eyes narrowed with unease and bewilderment. "What did you say we were looking for again?"

Without tearing her eyes off the woods, Saderia tensely flicked her tail and frowned. "Nothing in particular. Just keep your eyes open for anything strange and...out of the ordinary. I want to explore this patch of woods more thoroughly and see if we can find anything...weird..."

Dash just nodded and absently turned to gaze out at the shadowy woods around him, deciding not to question it.

Without bothering to look back at him, Saderia turned to gaze out in the opposite direction, her eyes flashing with fire. Truth be told, she herself wasn't sure what they were looking for, but she didn't let that fact discourage her. If anything, it only made her even more curious. It seemed that every time she came to the valley and the eerie woods around it, she felt something strange. Whether it was the sensation of being watched or just an odd feeling that something was off, something always seemed to feel wrong around the valley. This time, she was determined to figure out what it was.

Narrowing her eyes, Saderia stepped deeper into the woods, squeezing past two tight trees towering just in front of her. With Dash close behind her, she picked her way cautiously through the woods. Everywhere she stepped, her paw seemed to find a leaf or a twig, breaking the silence with soft crackling sounds or the quiet rustling of undergrowth. Saderia

tried not to wince as she picked her way through the forest, but every step she took only broke the silence with more noise. It was impossible to be quiet in the deepest, darkest depths of the most enclosing woods in the forest.

Forcing herself to ignore the noise, she stumbled deeper into the dark woods, slowly winding through the trees and pushing through thick masses of bushes. With every step she took, she scanned the shadows around her with dark amber eyes, trying not to shiver. The darkness of the woods seemed to leer back at her, growing colder and colder the deeper in she went. Everywhere she looked, all she saw were hordes of gnarled, dead trees competing for space, their twisted branches locking together in a pitch black spiderweb over her head. Every bush around her seemed to hide an enemy in its thorny, shadowy branches, but nothing stirred in the dark woods. Without a sound, Saderia moved deeper and deeper into the forest, scanning the woods wildly with her eyes.

While Dash stumbled along a few paces behind her, absently scanning the forest around him with dull amber eyes, Saderia padded ahead, never tearing her eyes off the dark forest. Over and over again, she snapped her head back and forth, searching all sides of the forest for any sign of danger. No matter where she looked, though, all she saw were more shadows and trees towering around her. Nothing stirred and no sound whispered through the tense woods. The forest was silent.

A tense frown crossed Saderia's face. Beginning to feel discouraged, she scanned the woods around her uncertainly, searching for even the tiniest clue. Everywhere she turned, the woods remained the same—dark, thick, and empty. Her eyes narrowed and her claws dug deep into the ground in frustration. Just when she started to feel hopeless, though, a darker, stranger feeling suddenly swept over her.

Slowly, the hairs along her back started to prickle and rise up one by one. An eerie chill shivered down her spine, even icier than the dark air around her. Gradually, her blood started to run cold, as if an icicle had melted in her veins. Every inch of her tensed. A sinister prickling sensation shivered through the fur on the back of her neck, making her skin crawl. Her heart beat faster with fear. Somewhere in the darkness of the deep, thick woods around her, someone was watching her.

Her breath caught. In a flash, she whipped around to face the dark land in front of her and jumped. Right before her eyes, a pitch black shadow suddenly darted through the trees in a flash so fast she almost missed it. In an instant, it flitted behind a dead tree and vanished. A second later, a thick, dense clump of shadowy undergrowth started to tremble in front of her, its branches rustling and its leaves fluttering wildly up around it. There was no way it was just the wind.

Saderia's heart leapt. "Hey!" With a shrill gasp, she sprang toward the bush as fast as she could, never once stopping to think.

At once, Dash whipped around to look at her and let out a wild cry of surprise. "Saderia, wait!"

Saderia didn't listen. In a flash, she dove into the bush as fast as she could, setting the air on fire with the crackle of snapping branches and rustling leaves. The instant she crashed into the undergrowth, though, she found nothing. The bush was completely empty. Gasping for breath and wincing at the stinging of the branches, she clumsily stumbled out of the bush and looked up. Her eyes widened in shock.

A few paces away from her, another bush started to rustle almost violently, sending leaves flying wildly up into the air. A second later, a shadow darted out of it and dove into the next bush, barely visible against the sheer darkness of the forest.

Saderia's heart skipped. She didn't stop to think. As fast as she could, she stumbled to her paws and leapt after the flitting shadow, her heart beginning to pound faster. In a flash, she took off running through the trees in a wild streak of orange fur, her eyes locked on the rustling bushes. Just as she wove around a copse of trees and staggered through a clump of undergrowth, the shadow in front of her suddenly darted out of the bushes. Before her eyes, the dark streak shot out ahead of her and took off running through the woods as fast as it could.

Her eyes widened in shock. "No! Stop!" Gritting her teeth, she forced herself to move faster. Ignoring the wild pounding of her heart, she lunged through two towering trees and took off running through the dense forest as fast as her paws could go. The woods seemed to rise up to block her path, but she made herself keep moving. In a flash, she lunged between the tightly clustered trees and wove around their dead, gnarled trunks, never daring to slow down. Low-hanging branches tore at her sides and slapped at

her face with every move she made, but she ignored the sting of pain and forced herself to keep running. As if trying to pull her back, the thick grasses and weeds rising up between the trees wrapped around her paws, but she plowed through them and kept moving. As fast as she could possibly go, she tore through the shadowy undergrowth and raced around the trees after the shadow, leaving Dash racing desperately after her.

“Saderia, wait!” Her friend’s frightened voice echoed through the dark forest, seeming oddly far away. When Saderia cast a quick glance over her shoulder, she couldn’t see him through the darkness around her. Her heart skipped, but she ignored her fear. Snapping back around to face forward, she only moved faster, determined to catch up to the shadow.

Ahead of her, the shadow ducked behind a copse of tall trees and vanished in a wild rustle of bushes that seemed to ring through the silence of the forest. Saderia gritted her teeth. Urging her paws to move faster, she dove through a copse of shadowy trees and undergrowth, ignoring the branches slapping at her face and the thorns tugging at her fur. On unsteady legs, she charged after the shadow. Her paws barely seemed to touch the ground. In a flash, she tore through the bushes and trees around her, feeling her heart beat faster in her chest. Her breath heaved out in short, heavy pants and her heart raced so fast she could barely feel it, but she never stopped running. Desperation gleamed in her wide amber eyes.

Hardly daring to breathe, she charged toward the copse of trees where the shadow had vanished. The instant she got close, she bunched her muscles and leapt forward with all the strength she had. In a wild flash of bristling orange fur, she shot out past the shadowy copse of trees and flew through the air. Her eyes widened in shock.

Without warning, the woods suddenly fell away around her, sending her flying out into open air. The wild roaring of the waterfall suddenly thundered in her ears, only now ringing out over the wild pounding of her heart. The short grassy area in front of the waterfall instantly took shape before her eyes. The abrupt, rocky edge of the cliff rose up just in front of her. Beside her, the river soared through the grass faster than ever, racing toward the edge of the cliff where the waterfall thundered into the pool below. Blinding sunlight glinted through the canopy above, turning the crystalline waters pure white. The bright light flashed in Saderia’s eyes, nearly blinding her.

Her breath caught in her throat. With a shrill scream, she crashed down on the grass just in front of the cliff, nearly tripping over her own paws. Clawing desperately at the grass to stop herself, she staggered wildly across the tall green stalks along the side of the river, heading right for the edge of the cliff. Her eyes went wide. A second before she tumbled off the edge of the cliff, she dug her claws deep into the ground and caught her fall. In a split second, she stumbled to an abrupt halt right on the edge of the cliff.

Her heart skipped a beat. With wide eyes, Saderia stared down at the rushing waterfall tumbling down below her, its thunderous roar ringing in her ears. The wide valley below her seemed to spiral before her eyes. Her mind whirled. Gasping for breath, she stared down at the blindingly sunny valley below her, then froze when a twig snapped behind her. Her heart stopped.

With a shrill cry of alarm, she whipped around, but never got to see her attacker. In a flash of speed too fast for her mind to process, something slammed hard into her side, knocking the breath from her throat. Her paws slipped on the grass. Before she could catch herself, she stumbled backward on the very edge of the cliff.

For a split second, she seemed to teeter on the edge, half in the air and half on the ground. In a single instant, the entire world seemed to slow down around her. Air rushed past her fur, but she barely felt it. Everything seemed to stop as her paws trembled on the edge. For an instant, time stood still. And then she fell.

Letting out a deafening scream, Saderia tumbled backward over the edge of the cliff, her eyes wide and her paws flailing wildly through nothing but open air. Wind whipped past her fur. Surrounded by nothing but air, Saderia plummeted down in a blur so fast it made her head spin. The entire world seemed to blur around her into nothing but a blinding haze of yellow sun and bright green trees. Her mouth gaped open in a shrill cry, but nothing came out. In a split second, her back smacked against one of the sleek stones jutting out from the cliff with a sharp, agonizing crack, knocking the breath right out of her throat.

Her heart stopped. Before she could even realize what was happening, she tumbled down the slanted hill of rocks in a wild blur of speed, heading straight for the bottom of the valley. Just as soon as she

tumbled backward off the rock that had struck her back, she slammed down onto the next one. Her head cracked back against the stone an instant before she slipped off and tumbled downward, making the entire world blur. Pain burned through her body. Somewhere through the haze of pain clouding her mind, she was aware of a thick, sticky liquid streaming through her fur down the back of her head. A second later, she smacked against a lower rock and tumbled farther and farther downward, her vision a blur of pain and fear.

A wild scream tore out of her throat. “Help!” Before she had even gotten the word out, her head smacked against a lower rock. Blood splattered the wet, smooth surface just as she slipped off, coloring her hazy world with a streak of red. The entire universe seemed to turn to nothing but a blur around her. Rolling over and over, she tumbled down the rocks without stopping, her head cracking against the stone over and over again and her limbs and sides screaming with pain at the sting of the jagged stones slicing past them. Helplessly, Saderia tumbled down the side of the cliff with a shrill cry, her body on fire with pain.

Before she could even realize what was happening, her head suddenly snapped back against a rock. Fiery pain shot through her like a lightning bolt. Instantly, Saderia’s world blurred. Her vision turned bright red with blood, then black as night. With a muted gasp, she let her eyes flutter shut as she tumbled down the last few rocks. In a blur of blood and bristling orange fur, her body rolled off the rocks and collapsed limply onto the thick grass of the valley below. She didn’t move.

Saderia’s breath heaved out in short, ragged gasps. Through the haze of pain clouding her mind, she struggled to open her eyes, but couldn’t. All she could see and feel was darkness all around her. In the last few seconds before she slipped into unconsciousness, she heard a wild, terrified voice ring out above her, echoing as if over a huge distance.

“Saderia! What happened...?” In a flash, the voice abruptly broke off in a wild shout of pain and fear.

Saderia’s breath caught. The darkness seemed to weigh down on her heavier than ever. Even as a wild cry burst out above her, she felt herself slipping deeper and deeper into the shadows. Before she could stop it, darkness swept over her and her head lolled back against the grass as she

sank into unconsciousness. She didn't stir again. Only her labored breathing proved she wasn't dead.

A second later, a sleek yellow lioness leapt lightly down the bloodstained rocks alongside the waterfall and stepped up to tower over her unconscious victim. A wide, triumphant sneer twitched at the corners of her mouth. With glinting blue eyes and a wild grin, she watched as the Princess's blood trickled toward the pool of water beneath the roaring waterfall in a stream through the grass. Her dark red blood seeped into the sparkling waters, turning the crystal-like ripples to red and tainting the ancient pond the same way it had been tainted in the past.

Triumph gleamed in the lioness's eyes. Throwing back her head, she let out a wild, victorious laugh, her eyes shining with excitement and her mouth curling up in a gruesome sneer.

"You always fall for that trick, Princess. And you won't get away this time."

Chapter Nineteen

Revenge

Dying orange light flashed across Saderia's closed eyes, casting strange, flickering patterns through the darkness all around her. Wincing, she flattened her ears as her eyes twitched then slowly fluttered open. Gradually, the world around her swam into view through the haze blurring her vision. With dull, lost eyes, she stared out at the land before her without knowing exactly what she was seeing. Slowly, pale green grass began to take shape around her, springing up in short sprigs all across the dirt she was lying on. Dying sunlight streamed out from somewhere overhead, turning the green stalks orange and casting shadows across the land. Somewhere in the distance, she could just barely make out a wall of bushes and trees rising up to form a dense patch of woods around her, but she couldn't see anything else from where she lay. She blinked once as she slowly started to creep back into consciousness, then froze.

Just as the world swam before her eyes, a sharp jolt of pain raced through her, setting her entire body on fire. A strangled yelp shuddered out of her throat. As if jolted awake by the agony, she noticed for the first time the stinging pain burning all over her body. Hardly daring to breathe, she slowly turned her head to look back at herself and felt her heart skip. Deep gashes lined her sides and sliced through her legs, looking even more gruesome in the dying light of the sun. Sticky blood clung to her bristling fur, while some of it had already dried into thick, unkempt clumps. As she swam back to reality, she could feel sticky liquid clinging to the fur around her face and the back of her head. The scent of blood rising up from her own body was overpowering. Every deep wound on her body seemed to scream with pain, and her burning muscles and bruised sides burned with agony as she slipped out of unconsciousness.

Her heart skipped to life and raced faster in her chest, sending shivers through her aching body. A dark sense of dread lurked in the back of her mind, making her feel cold with fear. Something was wrong...badly

wrong. Struggling to shake off her fear, she tried to raise one of her aching front paws to touch one of her wounds and see how bad it was, but couldn't move her leg. Blinking in surprise, she glanced down at her paws and almost jumped.

Both her front legs and her back legs were tied tightly together by a long, thick length of rough, scratchy rope. Her eyes grew wide. Hardly daring to breathe, she held her tied front legs up to her face and tried to move her paws to wriggle out of the rope, but couldn't. The binds had been tied tightly around her paws, making it almost impossible to move them at all. Whenever she tried, the scratchy rope sent a wave of pain washing over her. Her heart began to beat faster as she stared down at her tied paws, sending chills racing to every part of her body. Why was she tied up?

A quiet, sinister snicker suddenly whispered through the air right beside her, sending a jolt of icy cold fear racing through her body. With a strangled gasp, Saderia snapped her head up to face the source of the sound and froze. Every inch of her aching body went numb with shock and her heart skipped with disbelief.

A gaunt sandy yellow lioness towered over her, leering down at her with a wide, triumphant sneer. A long, tattered brown rope hung looped around her neck, almost hiding her lanky appearance. Her narrowed ice blue eyes glimmered in the dying light, shining with victory. The sides of her sharp, angular face seemed to curl up in a wide, toothy sneer. Her short blonde tail flicked eagerly back and forth and she seemed to lick her lips as she leered down at Saderia, her smile growing even wider.

Saderia's heart stopped in her chest. With wide, stunned amber eyes, she stared up into the cold ice blue eyes of the lioness she had never expected to see again. Her breath caught and her gasp stuck in her throat. For a long moment of silence, she stared up at the lanky lioness in shock, struggling to find her words. "Lolista..." In a soft, trembling voice, she stammered out her name. "What...What are you doing here?"

Lolista took a step closer to her, her cruel grin growing even wider and her ice blue eyes shimmering with triumph. Slowly, she let out a soft, eerie snicker. "I swore revenge, Princess. You didn't really think I would forget that, did you?"

Saderia's eyes widened in horror. "I...I thought you were dead..."

“Yes, that’s what you’d like to think, isn’t it?” Lolista curled her lip and sneered down at her, her tail lashing coldly across the grass. “You had quite a nice plan, Princess, leaving me here to die at the hands of those... things.”

Saderia shivered and gritted her teeth, trying to hide the pain and fear shining in her eyes. “We looked for you!” she spat. “We didn’t want anybody to die at the hands of the hunters!”

“Save your cute little speeches for the rest of the animals in the forest, Princess,” Lolista whispered, her eyes flashing with a bitter, eerie cold. “Unlike them, I know when I hear a lie.”

Saderia furiously lashed her tail. “It’s not a lie!” Gritting her teeth, she looked away from Lolista and almost jumped when her eyes darted to the patch of land on the other side of her. Right behind the evil lioness, a blood-streaked mess of dull brown fur lay in a heap on the grass, barely moving at all. With barely a breath, Saderia’s best friend lay limply on his side, his body covered with deep wounds and gashes and his fur speckled with blood. Thick ropes were tied around his front and back paws, binding them tightly together. His head rested lifelessly against the ground. He hardly seemed to breathe.

Saderia’s heart lurched in her chest. “Dash!” With a shrill, terrified cry, she snapped her head back up to look at Lolista, her eyes wide with horror. “Is he...?”

“He’s not dead, so don’t get your little Princess heart broken yet.” With a cold sneer, Lolista glanced back at her son and almost instantly curled her lip in a disgusted scowl. Her eyes narrowed and flashed with bitterness, but after shooting her son a long, dark glare, she slowly looked back at Saderia. An eerie, dangerous shadow crossed her face and her voice dropped to a deadly whisper. “You don’t need to fret either, Princess, because I have no intention of killing him without killing you first, so you don’t have to worry about getting your sweet little heart broken when he dies.”

Saderia gaped at her in horror, her eyes growing wide. “Yeah, because I’ll be dead!” She shook her head in disbelief. “What is *wrong* with you?” In disgust, she stared up at the lioness with wide eyes, never daring to look away. She would have thought that over time, Lolista might have calmed down a bit, but apparently, she was wrong. Though not stark raving

mad like before, she was still quite clearly *insane*. Honestly, she wasn't sure how Dash had come out sane with Lolista as a mother...

Lolista sharply twitched her tail and narrowed her eyes with a dangerous glint. "I'd watch that mouth of yours, Princess, unless you want your tongue yanked out."

Saderia snorted and made herself glare at her, trying to seem as brave as possible even though her paws were trembling with fear. "I'm not scared of you."

Lolista chuckled softly. "Oh, I don't doubt that, Princess, because I already know you're not very bright." When Saderia narrowed her eyes, Lolista just snickered and gestured to her paws. "Look at you! You're lying on the ground with your paws tied together, covered in your own blood. Only a Princess as air-headed and stupid as you wouldn't be afraid."

Saderia snarled under her breath and shot the lioness a withering glare, struggling to hide her fear with anger. "Why don't you just leave me alone? I haven't done anything to you!"

Lolista raised an eyebrow. "You killed my husband."

"You hated your husband!" Saderia shouted, her tail lashing furiously back and forth.

"Only a little." Lolista merely shrugged her shoulders and frowned. "Besides, I only left him and hated him because of K and M and the whole ordeal that went down between him and them, so that's pretty much your fault, too. And on top of that, I've been watching you lately, Princess, and I see what you've done to my son. As if it weren't bad enough that you stole him from my side and turned him over to your side, you've managed to turn him into a stupid, pathetic, blithering idiot! All he ever does is trail in your paw steps and kiss the ground you walk on!"

Saderia bared her fangs with a sharp hiss. "Dash is not an idiot! If he had been on 'your side,' he would have been nothing but a cruel, despicable *lunatic* just like you! Besides, you've got no right to blame him for being on 'my' side—you're the one who left him in the first place!"

"Clearly, you don't understand the word 'regrets,' Princess." A tight, forced sneer crossed Lolista's face and her ice blue eyes grew dark with a hard, dangerous glint. "But I suppose that's because everything you do is automatically considered right in this twisted forest."

Saderia snorted and curled her lip. “Yeah, right. The only thing you’d ever regret, Lolista, is not killing him when you left!”

In a flash, Lolista lunged toward her with a wild, furious snarl. Before Saderia could react, the lioness slammed her face down in the dirt and drove her claws deep into her shoulders. With a shrill cry of alarm, Saderia tensed and instantly tried to struggle out of the binds tying her paws together, but couldn’t. Blood spilled out over her shoulders and her entire body burned with pain.

“Does it hurt, Princess?” Lolista bared her fangs and let out a low growl, her ice blue eyes blazing with fury. “Imagine that kind of pain *every single night for months!* Imagine waking up every day with that kind of pain and wondering if you’re going to *die* that day! Imagine walking through the woods to try to find something to eat to survive only to get shot by one of those *things!*” Her claws dug in deeper and a low snarl rumbled in her throat when Saderia let out a cry of pain. “You think I’m the bad guy, Princess, but you’re worse than I am. You left me to a fate worse than death, and you know it!” She let out a sick, raucous laugh, her eyes wide and her mouth curled up in a crazy, bloodthirsty grin. “I hope it hurts, Princess! I hope you cry enough tears to make up for all those nights I stayed up waiting to *die!*”

Saderia let out a shrill cry of pain, thrashing desperately to shake Lolista off and frantically trying to wriggle out of the ropes binding her paws, all to no avail. Just when she began to hope that she would pass out again, if for nothing else than to end the pain coursing through her body, Lolista’s claws retracted from her shoulders. With a low growl, she leapt off of Saderia and stepped away, ending the pain. With a gasp of surprise and relief, Saderia looked up sharply to see what had stopped her and froze.

A few paces away from her on the other side of Lolista, Dash had lifted his head. With wide, horrified amber eyes, he stared at them in shock, his fur bristling and his mouth gaping open in horror. All the color seemed to drain out of his face.

With a poisonous smile and a sickly sweet chuckle, Lolista slowly turned to leer down at him, her eyes twinkling with danger. “Did you enjoy your sleep, Dash?”

“M-Mom?” Hardly daring to breathe, Dash stared up at her in horror, barely able to choke out the words. “What...What is going on?”

With wide eyes, he glanced past her and almost jumped when his gaze fell on Saderia. His breath caught when he saw the horrified look on her face and the blood coating her fur. “Saderia!” Almost instantly, a low growl rose in his throat. “What did you do to her?”

Lolista let out a mock long-suffering sigh. “Always choosing the Princess over your own mother. Only Dastarius could father a son as cruel and stupid as you.”

Dash bared his fangs in a snarl. “Stay away from Saderia.”

“I would love to, son, but unfortunately, she owes me a debt that can only be paid in blood.” With a sickening smirk, Lolista leered down at her two captives and arched an eyebrow, her eyes flashing in the dying light. “And until she’s dead, you’ve got no other choice but to go down with her. That’s the price you’ll pay for betraying me.”

Dash’s fur bristled with fury and disgust. “*I betrayed you?* You’re the one who left me with Dastarius!”

Lolista raised an eyebrow, then simply unsheathed her claws and glanced back at Saderia with a faint grin. Before either of them could react, she suddenly swooped down and raked her claws across Saderia’s face, making her lurch back with a wild cry of pain.

Dash’s eyes went wide with shock. While Saderia rolled away from the lioness with a shrill cry of pain, her face streaming with blood, he snapped up to look at Lolista in disbelief, his eyes wide and his fur bristling in horror. “What’d you do that for?” he demanded, his voice strangled with equal amounts of horror and hatred.

Lolista held up a claw and cast him a dark, ominous sneer. “I’ll tell you the same thing I told her, *Dash*—watch your mouth. One more word out of you and your little Princess girlfriend here might just die a bit prematurely.”

Dash gaped at her in disbelief. Instantly, he opened his mouth to say something, but just as quickly tensed and closed it again when Lolista leaned closer to Saderia. A shiver of fear raced through his fur.

Lolista raised an eyebrow at him, her voice soft and icy cold. “What was that?”

Dash swallowed hard and quickly shook his head in response, his face tense with fear. “N-Nothing,” he choked out.

A cruel smile twitched at the corners of Lolista's mouth. "Good. You're starting to get it."

Saderia glared up at Lolista through the blood on her face with as much fire as she could muster. As Lolista leered down at them, though, Saderia's glare faltered with nervousness as she realized how much danger they were truly in. A shiver raced down her spine. Hardly daring to breathe, she stared up at Lolista and forced herself to speak up, her voice soft and tense in an attempt to hide her fear. "What are you going to do to us?"

Lolista raised an eyebrow and sneered. "Don't worry, Princess. We're just going to play a little game." Before Saderia could say a word, Lolista suddenly lurched forward and grabbed the long piece of rope hanging off of her tied paws. In a flash, she yanked hard on the rope, swiveling Saderia around on the grass in one harsh, abrupt movement.

A sharp cry of pain tore out of Saderia's throat. Squeezing her eyes shut, she frantically tried to tug her paws free of the rope, but her struggles were in vain. The rope remained tight around her paws. Agony blazed in her wounds and her side burned with pain as Lolista spun her around on the grass by her paws. Against her will, the lioness turned her completely around, ignoring her shrill hiss of pain. Almost as instantly as she had grabbed the rope, she dropped it back on the grass and stepped back with a soft, sinister snicker. "Take a look, Princess."

Saderia bit back an insult. Gritting her teeth against the pain burning in her irritated wounds, she reluctantly forced her eyes open with a growl, then froze. In an instant, her entire body tensed with terror and her eyes grew wide. Her heart skipped a beat.

Right before her eyes, the short sprigs of grass dotting the land turned to sheer, hard rock. Right in front of her tied paws, the craggy rock dipped down abruptly into an enormous hollow in the ground. Stretching all the way to the back of the huge clearing it hid in, the rocky hollow in the ground before her was like nothing she had ever seen before. Massive ledges made of hard gray stone spiraled downward all around the hollow in circles, like stepping stones that led down to the very bottom of the hollow deep in the ground. In a way, they almost resembled the ridges around the valley Saderia had turned into her clubhouse—only infinitely sharper and more dangerous. Dozens of holes were carved into the rocky walls rising up over each narrow ledge, leading into caves covered in dark shadows. Every

single ledge seemed to have some sort of hole carved into it, leading somewhere deep inside the stony walls of the hollow. At the very bottom of the enormous stone hollow, sharp stones with glinting, piercing edges rose up into the air, threatening to stab anyone who happened to stumble too close to the edge.

Saderia's breath caught in her throat. In a flash, memories of her Dream flickered through her mind, sending a violent shiver racing down her spine. Feeling sick, she gazed down into the deep hollow, her head spinning at the sight of the dizzying fall stretching out between her and the spiky bottom. Her heart skipped a beat. "What...What is this place?" she whispered.

"This?" Lolista gazed down at the rocky hollow and let out a cold, humorless laugh. "This is my home, Princess. Like it?" She curled her lip. "This is where I stayed back when the hunters were crawling all over the woods. This was the only place where I could be even remotely safe. Nice, huh?" Without another word, she turned to stalk away from Saderia, disappearing from sight. A second later, a sharp, strangled cry rang out behind her.

With a tense gasp, Saderia looked back just in time to see Lolista stalk back up to the edge of the hollow, dragging Dash by the end of his rope. While the dark lion winced and struggled to get away, the lioness merely dragged him up to the edge and dropped the rope when she slid him into place beside Saderia with his paws resting just before the rocky edge, inches away from the dizzying fall. Gritting his teeth and trying not to wince, Dash gazed down at the hollow right beside Saderia and shuddered, a gleam of fear lighting up his wide amber eyes. A shiver raced through his fur.

"Listen up now because I don't like to repeat myself." With a calm, almost amiable flick of her tail, Lolista stalked up between them and gazed down into the dizzying hollow, her eyes gleaming with anticipation and her mouth curling up in a bloodthirsty sneer. When Saderia and Dash both looked up at her with wide, horrified eyes, she merely smiled and licked her lips. "These are the rules of the game: you're not allowed any help, and you're *not* working together. I've laid out a game board around here. Your only goal in this is to survive for as long as you can until the game is over.

Do you understand?" With a cruel, condescending gleam in her eyes, she looked down at each of them and snickered under her breath.

Saderia stared up at her in horror, her fur bristling and her heart thumping faster with fear. "You're crazy! This isn't a game!" A low, desperate growl rumbled in her throat. "Lolista, stop this! You've got nothing to gain from this! You're just going to make this worse for yourself!"

Lolista raised an eyebrow and snickered. "How is this going to be bad for me? I'm going to get to watch you suffer for what you did, and no one will ever find out that I'm the one who killed you because you'll be dead and unable to tell them. You said yourself that you thought I was dead, Princess, so I expect your Queeny mother and the rest of your family think that, too. No one's going to think I'm the reason you disappeared. I'm going to come out of this just fine. You two, on the other hand, are a different story." Her eyes flashed and she eagerly licked her lips. "You might as well save your breath, Princess. Your pretty words aren't going to work on me."

Saderia narrowed her eyes in a scowl even as her heart beat faster and her mind began to whirl with panic. "Can't you see that this is wrong?" With wide, desperate eyes, she stared up at Lolista, struggling to hide her fear. "You might hate me, but what about Dash? He's your son! Are you going to kill him, too?"

Lolista flicked her tail and snickered. "Of course I am, Princess. If I left him alive, he would just go tell K and M what happened and where to find me so they could kill me."

Saderia narrowed her eyes in a glare and gritted her teeth in disgust. "You're a sick animal, Lolista! Don't you care about *anything*? Don't you have even a tiny scrap of decency? Or even *sanity*?" Shaking her head, she curled her lip at her. "You almost make Dastarius look good. At least he's not completely insane like you."

"Dastarius is dead, sweetie," Lolista hissed in a low, mocking tone of voice, her ice blue eyes narrowing dangerously. "No need to talk about him as if he's still here. And by the way, Princess, the same rule that applies to your idiot boyfriend here also applies to you." Before Saderia could respond, Lolista unsheathed her claws and smacked Dash across the face without even looking back, making him jerk back with a sharp cry of pain. Saderia's eyes widened in horror. When Dash winced and buried his face in

his paws to try to assuage the pain in the five long claw marks dripping blood across his face, Lolista sneered a wide, bloodthirsty sneer. “You can say what you like, Princess, but he will always pay the price.” Seeing the horror on Saderia’s face, she just grinned. “Don’t look so shocked. Freedom to speak is a joke around here with animals like you in charge. You’re just on the other side of the unfairness for a change.”

Saderia winced, but glared mutinously at Lolista. Feeling her heart beat faster in her chest, she glared up at the sneering lioness, desperately trying to think of some way to save herself. There had to be some way to buy herself some time so she could think of a plan. Desperately trying to think of anything to latch onto, she felt her heart skip when something from Lolista’s threatening words jumped out at her. Struggling to hide her fear, she narrowed her eyes and dropped her voice to a low, ominous growl, hoping beyond hope it didn’t betray her terror. “Dastarius isn’t *completely* dead, Lolista.” She made herself look up and coolly meet her gaze, hoping she would take the bait. “Dash has even talked to him recently.”

Lolista raised an eyebrow at her. “And you call *me* insane. The dead don’t talk, Princess. Hate to break it to you, but it’s true.”

“Maybe not, but ghosts do,” Saderia hissed back as convincingly as she could. Even as she forced herself to leer challengingly back at her captor, she discreetly started to wriggle her paws beneath the binds, hoping desperately that she might be able to slip out of them.

Lolista blinked in surprise, then scowled and wrinkled her nose in bewilderment. “What are you going on about, Princess? Ghosts aren’t real.”

“Yes, they are.” Meeting her gaze as calmly as she could, Saderia struggled to keep her tone as even and convincing as possible. “I talk to ghosts all the time in my sleep, and Dash has talked to Dastarius’s ghost in the last few weeks. Right, Dash?”

Catching on, Dash nodded hastily, narrowing his eyes as seriously as he could. “Yeah. It’s true, Mom.”

With a dark frown, Lolista turned around to scowl at him. The instant her eyes flicked away from Saderia, the tiger instantly whipped around to face her bound paws and frantically tugged at the ropes, desperately trying to get free. No matter how hard she struggled, though, the ropes wouldn’t break. A second later, Lolista slowly turned back around to frown at her. Instantly, Saderia stopped struggling so aggressively and

instead looked up to meet her gaze, trying to remain calm. Behind Lolista, Dash instantly started yanking at his ropes, struggling violently to get free while his mother's back was turned to him.

Lolista just frowned and shook her head at Saderia with raised eyebrows. "You always have been strange, Princess." She paused, then flicked her tail back at Dash with a roll of her eyes. "I never knew insanity could spread like a disease, though."

Saderia opened her mouth to protest, but before she could get a word out, Lolista suddenly smacked her hard across the face, making her wince and leaving more bloody claw marks across her muzzle. While Dash froze and looked up in horror, Lolista simply glared down at her and sharply flicked her tail. "Enough of this weirdness. It's time for the game to begin."

Wincing and trying to bite back the pain burning in her bloody face, Saderia opened her mouth to say something else, but Lolista never gave her the chance. Before she could say a word, the lioness slapped a paw over her mouth, her ice blue eyes flashing with danger. "Enough, Princess." Smiling a sickly sweet smile, she leered down at her and curled her lip. "I don't need you to make a fool out of me, thank you."

In a flash, she yanked her paw away from Saderia's mouth, leaving claw marks across her cheek. Before Saderia or Dash could say another word, she stalked past both of them to stand on the very edge of the hollow and slowly turned around to face them. With flashing ice blue eyes, she glared back and forth between the two of them and sharply lashed her tail, her face dark with anticipation. "I'm going to be nice right now and tell you both that if you want to survive, working together is only going to take down both of you. If one of you hopes to make it out alive, you had better fend for yourself and only yourself. Friendship is overrated anyway." Before either of them could speak, Lolista turned to gaze out at the hollow with glinting ice blue eyes, a slow, eerie sneer curling up the corners of her mouth.

Hiding a gleam of fear with a tense frown, Saderia reluctantly followed her gaze and shuddered when she caught sight of the sharp, spiky stones jutting up from the bottom of the hollow. Her heart fluttered with fear and her throat went dry. Trying to keep her voice steady, she slowly

looked up at Lolista and forced herself to speak up in a slow, nervous whisper thick with dread. “Lolista? ...What are you going to do?”

Lolista smiled a slow, sick smile. “Welcome to the first test, Princess. Good luck surviving it.”

Before Saderia could try to protest, the lioness suddenly whipped around and grabbed the end of the rope tied around the tiger’s paws. Ignoring Saderia’s wild yelp of pain, Lolista yanked her forward until her front paws dangled over the edge of the deep, stony hollow. Saderia’s breath caught in her throat. Below her, the stony ledges spiraled downward in a wide circle that made her head spin, seeming to swirl around the huge, pointed stones jutting up from the bottom. Her heart beat faster with fear. Feeling her front paws tremble over open air, she looked up at Lolista with wide, horrified eyes, silently pleading for her not to do this.

Lolista only sneered down at her, her eyes gleaming with cruelty. “Look down, Princess,” she whispered. When Saderia only stared up at her in horror, she bristled and bared her fangs in a deafening snarl. “Look down!” With a ringing growl, she forced Saderia’s head down, making her gaze into the spiraling hollow below her.

A violent shiver raced down Saderia’s spine. Flinching, she gazed down at the glinting rocks in horror, her heart pounding so fast she could barely feel it. No longer caring that Lolista was watching, she struggled desperately to break free of the ropes around her paws, her breath heaving out in wild, shaky pants.

Lolista leaned closer to her with a soft sneer. “Fight harder, Princess,” she breathed in her ear, her voice a mocking whisper. “Come on, Princess, you can do it. You’re supposed to be so tough, aren’t you?” She threw her head back in a wild, taunting laugh that echoed around the silent clearing, sending shivers down Saderia’s spine. “I wish the kingdom could see you now, Princess! Then they would know how weak you are.” With a deadly grin torn between a sneer and a scowl, she turned to leer down at her with dark, flashing blue eyes. “Be sure to tell your little ghosty friends about me when you’re dead, Princess. And when you’re lying there on the bottom of the hollow, bleeding to death, be sure to smile with that stupid grin you always wear when you think you did something right. Just use the same one you wore when you left me here to die!”

Her eyes flashed with rage. Before Saderia could say a word, she lunged down with a feral snarl and grabbed the rope around Saderia's paws in her fangs. In a flash, she snapped around as fast as she could, lifting Saderia right off the ground. The tiger's eyes grew wide. With a wild, deafening snarl, Lolista tore her off the ground and slung her out into the wide open air right over the hollow. Her fangs snapped right through the ropes the instant she swung her around. With a loud, earsplitting scream, Saderia flew backward through the air as the shredded pieces of rope fell to the ground.

"Saderia!"

Dash's deafening shout rang through the air. Glancing back out of the corner of her eye, Saderia had just enough time to see him burst out of the ropes binding his front and back paws in a wild surge of strength. With eyes shining with horror, he lunged off the edge of the hollow after her as fast as he could, his horrified shout ringing in her ears.

Saderia had just enough time to see him fly down to the next ledge before she twisted around in midair. Her mouth opened in a wild, terrified scream. Air whipped past her fur on all sides as her heart raced in her chest. With a horrified shriek, she flew through the air in a wild blur of speed. Her back paws struggled wildly in their binds, while her front paws flailed frantically through the air, desperately trying to grab hold of something to stop her fall. *Anything*. The entire world seemed to blur around her. Below her, the tall, pointed stones seemed to leap up at her, drawing closer and closer while the rocky ledges spiraled around her. Her heart stopped in horror.

In a flash, one of the narrow, rocky ledges seemed to leap up at her from the blur of cold gray stone below. With a deafening crack and a painful crunch, she smacked against the very edge of the ledge. Pain shot through her body when her head snapped back against the stone with a rough crack. The breath left her throat in a sharp gasp. Before she could even try to catch herself, she rolled right off the edge of the ledge and tumbled downward, spinning wildly through the air.

With a harsh crack and an agonizing jolt of pain, she flew down and smacked against a narrow ledge right beneath the one she had tumbled off of. Just as she started to roll off the side, her back legs scraped against a sharp piece of stone jutting up on the edge of the ledge. Pain shot through

her legs when the edge caught on her skin, but even as it sliced her legs, it cut the rope. With a sharp snap, the ropes fell away, freeing her back paws too late.

Letting out a shrill scream, she rolled off the edge before she could catch herself. Her paws flailed desperately through the air to grab the edge of the ledge, but moved too late. Air rushed past her and the sky blurred before her eyes a second before her back smacked against hard rock. Her head snapped back against the ledge just as she rolled off, making her vision turn hazy with pain. Agony burned all throughout her bloody body. The world around her spun with dizziness and pain as she soared through the air, tumbling helplessly down the narrow ledges and flying toward the jutting spikes rising up from the very bottom.

A wild scream tore out of her throat. Twisting desperately through the air, she winced with a raw cry when her side slammed down against the hard edge of a wide ledge near the middle of the hollow. Desperately, she reached out with her paws to grab the stone, but couldn't move fast enough. Before she could do a thing, her body rolled off the edge of the ledge, sending her plummeting down to the spiky rocks. Her heart skipped with fear. With a wild, desperate cry, she twisted around and grabbed the very edge of the ledge with one paw, but couldn't hold on. In a flash, her paw slipped across the stone, unable to find purchase in the sheer, hard rock.

Her heart lurched. A second before her paw slipped off the side of the ledge and sent her plummeting to her death, she squeezed her eyes shut, then gasped. In a split second, something hard slammed down on her paw right before it slipped off the edge, trapping it firmly against the rock on top of the ledge and holding it in place. Her breath left her throat. Stopped by a force so strong it practically yanked her up, Saderia's body abruptly stopped falling and swung back toward the rocky ledge. Instantly, she smacked up against the sheer, hard face of rock below the ledge and winced with pain. Struggling to control the wild beating of her heart and gasping for breath, she snapped up to see what had saved her and froze. Her eyes grew wide with shock.

Dash stood shakily on the ledge above her, staring down at her with eyes wide with horror. All his fur bristled wildly with terror and his sides heaved with soft, urgent pants. His eyes glowed with fear and his legs shook violently beneath him. One of his front paws clamped down tightly

over hers on the very edge of the narrow ledge, trapping her paw against the rugged side of the ridge and holding her in place. His paw shook against hers as he struggled to hold her in place, stopping her from falling but leaving her dangling helplessly over nothing but open air.

Hardly daring to breathe, Saderia gazed up at him in shock, her heart hammering in her chest. Slowly, her eyes darted up to his at the same time that he looked down at her. Their eyes locked. At the same time, a jolt seemed to shoot through both of them when they realized what position they were in. Again.

Dash's eyes widened with horror at the same time Saderia's heart leapt with shock. For a split second, he stared at her without a word, then instantly lurched forward. With deep, shaky gasps, he hastily leaned down and grabbed her other paw without letting go of the one he held pressed to the ledge. In a flash, he tugged her other paw up until she could just barely grab the ledge. Gritting her teeth, Saderia instantly lunged upward and grabbed the edge as fast as she could, her heart pounding in her chest. With her back legs swinging wildly over open air, she clung desperately to the ledge, struggling to pull herself up. Hardly daring to breathe, Dash tensely grabbed her paws and started to help her up, then froze.

A wild, crazed laugh boomed out above them. With eyes wide with horror, Saderia gasped and snapped her head up at the same time Dash did to find the source of the noise. Her heart almost stopped when she saw where it had come from.

A few feet above them, Lolista leapt nimbly down onto one of the tall, rocky ledges just a few ridges over their heads. Triumph and cruel excitement glimmered in her bright ice blue eyes. Grinning wildly to herself, she leaned over the edge of the ledge and leered down at them. A cruel, evil snicker escaped her throat and her voice hissed out in a soft, icy whisper. "Well, isn't this cute? Is Dash going to be your hero again, Princess?" Her mouth curled up in a cruel, evil smirk. "I'll have to fix that."

Without another word, she bunched her muscles and leapt off the ledge to the one below it, her eyes glittering with cruelty and excitement. One by one, she leapt down from ledge to ledge, drawing closer and closer to them with each bound. In seconds, she would be right on top of them.

Dash's eyes gleamed with indecision. With a wild, shaky gasp, he looked sharply back at Saderia, then snapped around to look at Lolista. For

one tense second, he looked back and forth between the tiger dangling beneath his paws and the lioness lunging toward them, then slowly narrowed his eyes. Gritting his teeth, he cast Saderia one last glance through tense, terrified eyes, then let go of her paws. With a gasp, Saderia lurched downward, but just barely caught herself. Desperately, she clung to the edge of the ledge with both paws and looked up in shock, her heart beating faster with fear.

Dash didn't give her a second glance. Hiding the pain and terror in his eyes, he whipped around and lunged away from her before he could rethink what he was doing. As fast as he could, he lunged up to the ledge above him, then leapt to the next one in a streak of bristling dark brown fur. Without hesitating, he leapt toward Lolista, while she sprang down toward him. Fury and determination blazed in his amber eyes. Baring his fangs in a tense, desperate growl, Dash lunged up onto a wide, stony ledge several feet above Saderia's head. At the same time, Lolista leapt down onto the ridge in front of him, her eyes flashing with fury.

Dash didn't hesitate. Letting out a wild, furious snarl, he lunged toward Lolista with all of his might. At the same time, the lioness leapt toward him with outstretched claws, letting out a cold, eerie hiss. With a sharp smack, the two clashed together in midair. Lolista's claws drove into Dash's shoulders at the same time his claws smacked into her chest. Gritting his teeth with a strangled yelp of pain, Dash flew backward through the air and hit the ledge hard on his back.

Instantly, his head snapped back and smacked against the stone with a brutal crack, splattering the edge with blood. Before Lolista could pin him down, he instantly dug his claws into her shoulders and rolled her over. With a cold hiss of fury, Lolista rolled to the side, but dug her claws deep into Dash's shoulders, dragging him along with her. Hissing and snarling at the tops of their lungs, the two rolled across the wide ledge just along the edge in a wild streak of dark brown and blonde fur, snapping and clawing at each other with all of their might.

Saderia's heart lurched with terror. With a strangled yelp of fear, she stared up at her friend in horror, her heart beating faster every time he and his snarling mother rolled closer to the edge. Fear turned her blood to ice. For half a second, she watched them roll across the ledge in shock, then

furiously shook her head, knowing she couldn't afford to waste any time. Dash had left her there to fight Lolista for a reason—to buy her time.

As fast as she could, she tore her eyes off the fighting lions and struggled to pull herself up onto the ledge. Frantically, she kicked her back legs through nothing but open air until her paws suddenly met with the hard wall of stone below her. Digging her claws into the cracks in the stone and trying not to wince when they splintered against the hard rock, she desperately tried to haul herself over the edge. Feeling her heart beat faster in her chest, she scratched frantically at the rocky wall, struggling to push herself up. Even as she fought to pull herself up over the ledge, she looked up to find Dash and felt her blood run cold.

With a vicious snarl, Lolista slammed Dash's back up against the side of the ledge, letting his head dangle over the edge. Her claws drove deep into his bloody shoulders, practically shaking with rage. With a wide, gruesome sneer, she lurched forward to bite his throat, but Dash moved faster. Gritting his teeth, Dash kicked his back paws up into her stomach with all of his strength. Lolista's eyes widened. Letting out a strangled gasp of pain, she stumbled away from him, her stomach dripping with blood. In a flash, Dash leapt to his paws and darted after her, his amber eyes blazing with determination.

Saderia's heart beat faster with fear. Knowing she had to get there quickly to help her friend, she scrabbled desperately at the edge of the rock, fighting with all of her might to pull herself up. Without thinking, she reached a paw up over the side of the ledge to pull herself up, then froze with a loud shriek of alarm when her paw slipped, sending her lurching backward off the ledge.

Dash's eyes widened in shock as her scream rang through the hollow. With a sharp gasp, he skidded to a halt right in front of Lolista and whipped around to face Saderia, his eyes wide with alarm. "Saderia!"

Just in time, Saderia managed to grab the edge of the ledge firmly with both paws, just barely catching her fall. With wide eyes, she snapped up to look at Dash in shock and froze. Every part of her seemed to scream out in horror all at once.

In the split second that Dash looked back at her, Lolista lunged out behind him with a loud, furious snarl. Dash's eyes flashed with shock. Instantly, he whipped around to face Lolista, but couldn't move fast enough.

With a crack that seemed to ring through the rocky hollow, Lolista smacked him hard across the face, knocking him off balance and sending him stumbling backward with a strangled yelp of alarm. Dash never had time to catch himself. With a deafening cry, he stumbled backward and tumbled right off the edge of the ledge.

Saderia's heart stopped. "*Dash!*"

Dash's mouth gaped open in a deafening yowl of terror. Twisting wildly through the air, he reached out frantically with his paws to catch himself, but couldn't grab the ledge. In a flash, he plummeted down through the air with a sharp cry and smacked against a ledge just above Saderia with a harsh crack that knocked the breath out of him. Opening his mouth in a silent gasp, Dash rolled right off the ledge in a mess of flailing paws and bristling fur.

Helplessly, he slammed down onto the next narrow ledge and rolled off before he could catch his fall. In a wild swirl of fur and flashing claws, he tumbled down from ledge to ledge, unable to stop himself. Blood streaked across the edge of every ledge he tumbled down, slicking the stones with the wet, sticky liquid. Desperately, Dash twisted and turned through the air, letting out loud, breathless cries with every ledge he hit.

Just as he crashed down onto a wider ledge only a few feet above Saderia, he gritted his teeth and desperately twisted himself around as he rolled. Right as he tumbled off the edge, he snapped around and reached out as fast as he could. A second before he plummeted off the ledge, he sank his claws into the cracks on the edge of the ridge and just barely caught himself. With a gasp that knocked the breath from him, Dash snapped to a stop in midair. His body twisted around like a rag doll and smacked the hard wall of rock just below the ledge with a rough crack that made him wince. Even so, he never let go of the ledge above him. With wide eyes and trembling paws, he desperately clung to the ledge, dangling helplessly over nothing but open air as he struggled to pull himself up. Just like Saderia.

Saderia's heart skipped with dismay. "*Dash!*"

Dash fiercely gritted his teeth, squeezing his eyes shut against the pain burning in his bloody body. "I'm okay!" he choked out, struggling to hide the fear in his voice. "Just...save yourself!"

Saderia stared up at him in horror, then narrowed her eyes. Feeling a tense flash of determination, she dug her claws into the stone as hard as she

could, ignoring the pain as they splintered against the rock. New strength flowed through her body. Gritting her teeth, she kicked hard against the wall beneath the ledge she was clinging to, determined to pull herself up and get to Dash. Her paws scrabbled desperately on the ledge, struggling to pull her up. Even when she slipped, Saderia didn't stop. With all of her might, she forcefully hauled herself up onto the blood-streaked ledge until she had managed to lift her back paws up onto the edge. When at last she stood on firm ground, she stumbled away from the edge and looked up with a shaky breath, her heart pounding with determination. Instantly, her eyes darted toward Dash and her breath caught in her throat.

A few ridges above her, Dash dangled helplessly from the side of an enormous ledge, his back paws flailing wildly over open air. Desperately, he scrabbled at the edge of the ledge to pull himself up, but only seemed to slip farther down each time. Panic glowed in his eyes. Right above him, Lolista leapt off the ledge she had pushed him off of, her eyes locked on him. With wild, blazing ice blue eyes, she lunged down from ledge to ledge as fast as she could, heading straight for Dash and getting closer and closer each second.

Saderia didn't stop to think. With a deafening snarl of fury, she lunged upward as fast as she could, determined to reach Dash before Lolista did. As quickly as possible, she leapt onto the ledge above her and instantly lunged up to the next one. Forcing herself to move faster, she lunged from ledge to ledge, heading straight for Dash and never daring to slow down. Far above her, Lolista leapt downward toward her best friend at the same quick speed, her icy eyes glimmering with malice. Trapped between them, Dash struggled helplessly on the ledge, desperately trying to pull himself up to no avail. At the same time, Lolista got closer and closer. Gritting her teeth, Saderia lunged up the ledges as fast as she could, throwing caution to the wind. She had to get there first.

A split second before Lolista lunged onto the ledge and sent Dash flying to his death, Saderia leapt up onto the edge right beside him. Gasping for breath, she stumbled out in front of Dash and whipped around to face him with eyes wide with panic, desperate to know he was safe. A second later, the harsh thud of paws meeting stone sounded behind her. Her heart leapt up into her throat. With a shaky gasp, she whipped around to face her enemy, but never got a chance to attack.

In an instant, Lolista's paw flashed out and slammed into the side of her face with a crack that sent pain racing through her body. Saderia's eyes opened wide and her mouth gaped open in a scream. In a flash, she stumbled backward with her cheek streaming with blood, knocked off balance. Before she could even try to catch herself, she toppled over and fell backward off the ledge, her mouth gaping open in a shrill scream.

In a split second that made her head spin, Saderia plummeted down through the ice cold air, her fur rustling around her and her heart freezing with terror. She barely had time to scream, though. Just as the shrill cry left her throat, something snatched her paw right out of midair and caught her fall. With a gasp that knocked the breath from her throat, Saderia jolted to a stop in midair, her body snapping upward as she stopped falling. Sharp claws dug into her paw, sending pain racing through her but keeping her suspended in midair. Her breath caught in her throat. Struggling to breathe, she looked up with wide eyes and felt her heart skip with shock.

Dash's paw clung tightly to hers, just barely holding on and keeping her from plummeting to her death. His other paw desperately clutched the ledge above them, the only thing preventing them from falling. His claws scraped roughly across the stone and his foreleg shook with the effort it took to hold on. As though he were being tugged in two, he clung desperately to the ledge to hold himself up while still holding on tightly to Saderia's paw, leaving her dangling helplessly below him, surrounded by nothing but open air.

Saderia's breath caught in her throat. With wide eyes, she stared up at Dash in shock, hardly daring to breathe. Slowly, Dash looked back down at her, his expression twisted with equal amounts of pain and relief. Their eyes locked on each other. A strange emotion that Saderia couldn't identify glimmered in Dash's clouded amber irises. For half a second, the two stared at each other without a sound as they dangled from the ledge, seeming to say with their eyes what they couldn't with words. A second later, the moment was broken.

A cruel, icy laugh rang out over their heads. With wide eyes, Saderia and Dash snapped up to find the source of the voice just in time to see Lolista step out onto the edge of the ledge above them. Her eyes shone with triumph. Snickering to herself, the lioness stepped up to the very edge, right above Dash, and leered down at them. "Well, isn't *this* cute?" A wide,

mocking sneer curled up the corners of her mouth. “The two lovebirds.” Letting out a low, mocking laugh, she slowly leaned down closer to Dash, her eyes flashing with triumph.

Dash winced and shrank away from her sneering face as much as he could. With as much fire as he could muster, he glared up into her eyes, his paws practically shaking with rage and pain.

Lolista just grinned and chuckled. With knowing blue eyes, she leaned closer to him and lowered her voice to a soft, cruel hiss. “You’re in quite a predicament, son, but I’ll make you a deal.” Sneering and snickering under her breath, she leaned closer to him to whisper in his ear. “Drop the Princess, and I’ll let you live.”

Dash’s eyes widened in shock. When she drew back with raised eyebrows to wait for his response, he stared up at her in disbelief, his mouth gaping open and his paws tensing. For a long moment, he stared up at his mother with wide eyes, then gritted his teeth. Slowly, he narrowed his eyes and bared his fangs, a dark flash of fury and hatred blazing into his shadowed amber eyes. “No deal,” he whispered back, his voice shaking with equal amounts of anger and determination. “I’d rather die than ever betray Saderia again.”

While Saderia gazed up at him in shock, Lolista just rolled her eyes and let out a cruel chuckle. “You always were pretty dumb.”

“At least I’m not a monster like you,” Dash whispered back. Before Lolista could react, he looked down once, then instantly looked back up. With one last defiant glare at his mother, he curled his lip and let go of the edge. Lolista let out a gasp of shock as they both plummeted off the side of the ledge.

Saderia’s eyes widened and her breath caught in a sharp gasp. Side by side, she and Dash flew through the air, their fur whipping up around them and their paws flailing. Shock and disbelief shone in Saderia’s eyes. Her mouth opened in a scream, but nothing came out. Dash didn’t say a word. When she managed to catch a glimpse of his face through the fur whipping past her eyes, she saw nothing but darkness and resolution in his eyes. She never got a chance to scream. Just as they flew down toward the piercing stones rising up from the bottom of the hollow, Dash twisted in midair. Before she realized what he was doing, he shoved her away from

him as hard as he could, knocking the breath from her and sending them flying away from each other.

Her eyes opened in shock. Before she could even open her mouth to scream, she shot through the air in a flash and slammed down at the very back of a ledge just below her. Her breath caught in her throat. Just as her head snapped back on the rock and pain shot through her body, she started to roll backward, but she stopped when her legs slammed into a hard rock wall. Shock flashed in her eyes. Ignoring the pain burning in her body, she sharply lifted her head. In the split second it took for the pain to clear from her eyes, she realized she had collapsed onto a narrow ledge and rolled to the very back of it. The same wasn't true of Dash.

Pushed away from her by the force it had taken to throw her closer to the ledge, Dash sailed wildly through the air, flying farther and farther away from her. Saderia's heart lurched with terror. "*Dash!*" Desperately, she leapt to her paws and turned to lunge after him to try to catch him, but couldn't move fast enough.

In a flash, Dash soared downward toward the lowest ledges of the hollow with a loud, deafening shout of alarm. Before Saderia could leap after him, he crashed down onto a ledge just below her with a sharp, agonizing crack. His head smacked back against the stone with a snap that left blood splattered across the ledge. With a muted gasp, he rolled right off the edge of the narrow ridge and tumbled helplessly downward, unable to catch himself. In a blur of bloody dark brown fur, he tumbled down the short, narrow ledges, his body rolling helplessly across the stone and his head hitting the ridges hard. With each crack of his head against the stone, the light in his eyes grew dimmer.

Limply, he rolled off the narrow ledges and crashed down onto a wider ridge near the very bottom of the hollow with a harsh smack. His head snapped back against the stone with one final smack that knocked the light from his eyes. A second before he rolled over and slumped onto his side, Saderia saw his eyes glaze over and flutter shut. Lifelessly, he tumbled onto his side and fell still, just inches away from the edge of the ledge. His paws slumped limply to the stone and his head drooped onto the rock. Drenched in his own blood, he lay limply on the ledge at the bottom of the hollow, slowly spilling blood across the stone. He didn't stir.

Saderia's heart leapt up into her throat. "Dash!" Gasping for breath without feeling it, she staggered down the last few ledges, practically stumbling over her own paws. With her heart pounding wildly in her chest, she stumbled toward his limp body and staggered to a stop right beside him, nearly collapsing over his bloody body. Her eyes grew wide and her mind spun with horror. "Dash! Wake up!" Desperately, she grabbed his bloody shoulder and rolled him onto his back, but he didn't stir. His eyes remained shut tight and his mouth hung open in a silent scream, dripping with blood. His breath heaved out in hoarse, shallow gasps. Her heart stopped in her chest.

"Happy now, Princess?"

At the sound of Lolista's soft, mocking hiss, Saderia whipped around to face the source of the voice and froze. The lioness stood on the ledge right above her, leering down at her with cold, flashing blue eyes. Taking in deep, ragged breaths, the lioness glared down at her with a deep, furious scowl, her paws shaking with barely suppressed rage. Her blazing blue eyes locked on Saderia's, burning with hatred.

Frightened tears streaked down Saderia's face. Taking in a shaky breath, she gritted her teeth and glared up at Lolista with the hottest fire she could imagine blazing in her dark amber eyes. Her paws trembled against the stone beside her unconscious friend. "How could you?" she screamed, her voice raw and desperate. "He's your son, Lolista! Look what you've done to him!"

Lolista curled her lip in a cold scowl, her voice a deadly whisper. "I haven't done a thing. You're the reason this happened. You made me do this to him by dragging him down with you, you cruel, murdering Princess!" She bared her fangs in a crazed, gruesome sneer. "Now you'll pay for all the pain you've caused!"

With a deafening snarl, Lolista lunged off the ledge and sailed toward her, her claws glinting in the dying light. Before Saderia could react, she slammed into her with a brutal smack, knocking the breath from her throat. Her mouth opened in a scream, but nothing came out. In a flash, Lolista drove her claws deep into Saderia's shoulders and slammed her back onto the stone right beside her bloody friend, her blue eyes blazing with wild, crazy hatred and fury. Pain burned through Saderia's body as blood spilled out from her shoulders. Lolista loomed over her even as she

squirmed to break free of her grip, her icy eyes wild and her breath heaving out in harsh pants. With shaking paws, the lioness drove her claws deeper into Saderia's shoulders, pushing her back against the rock. Her voice rose up in a wild, maniacal screech. "Show me how *tough* you are now, Princess!"

Saderia gritted her teeth, her heart pounding wildly in her ears and her body burning with pain. With a furious growl, she kicked up at Lolista as hard as she could, catching her square in the stomach. Lolista's eyes widened in surprise. Letting out a strangled scream, she flew backward and stumbled away from Saderia, her belly streaming with blood.

Saderia didn't waste a second. As fast as she could, she leapt to her paws, her fur bristling and her heart hammering wildly in her chest. In front of her, Lolista staggered clumsily across the craggy stone, her paws slipping beneath her. Before she could catch herself, she stumbled backward and collapsed onto the cold gray stone with a low hiss and a snarl, her creamy yellow legs scrabbling desperately at the rock. Saderia's heart leapt with hope. Baring her fangs, she lunged toward the fallen lioness as fast as she could to pin her, but couldn't move quickly enough.

In a flash, Lolista's eyes snapped up to hers, blazing with a wild, otherworldly hatred. Before Saderia could crash down on her to pin her to the ledge, the lioness kicked up wildly with her back paws and struck Saderia hard in the chest, knocking the breath from her. Saderia's eyes went wide. Opening her mouth in a silent, breathless scream, she stumbled backward across the stone ledge toward the enormous wall of rock at the back of the ridge, knocked off balance. Her paws tripped over themselves as she desperately tried to catch her fall, sending her stumbling down toward the hard, rocky floor.

Lolista didn't give her time to even hit the ledge. In a wild blur of creamy yellow fur, she leapt to her paws and shot toward Saderia, baring her fangs in a deafening snarl. A split second before Saderia collapsed, Lolista reared up and slammed her paws into her shoulders, digging her claws deep into her bloody skin. Saderia's mouth opened in a silent cry of shock. Before she could fight back, Lolista shoved her backward and slammed her back up against the rocky wall with a harsh crash that made Saderia freeze. Her eyes went wide.

With a shrill shriek of pain, Saderia collapsed against the wall of rock with Lolista towering over her. Her head snapped back against the stone before she could stop it, sending a wave of pain shooting through her burning body. Dizziness swept over her and her vision blurred as blood streaked down her face. Standing on her back paws and pinning her against the wall, Lolista pulled her back off the wall of rock just enough to slam her back into it. When Saderia's head cracked against the stone and her vision blurred, the lioness swiveled around and threw her down on the ledge, her wild, bloodthirsty hiss ringing in Saderia's ears.

Letting out a wild cry of agony, Saderia collapsed onto the hard stone, her mind spinning with dizziness and her blood-streaked body burning with pain. Agony blazed through her body, but her heart beat faster. Desperately, she whipped around to face her attacker just in time to see Lolista lunge toward her with crazed blue eyes and outstretched claws, about to pin her to the ledge. Saderia's heart lurched. As fast as she could, she rolled around and kicked up with her back paws a second before Lolista hit her, catching her right in the stomach. With all of her strength, she threw the lioness backward, ignoring her strangled cry of surprise.

Saderia's mind whirled with desperation. Hardly daring to breathe, she stumbled to her paws as quickly as she could, her head spinning and her heart pounding with fear. In a flash, Lolista stumbled back a few steps away from her, but caught herself before she could fall. With blazing ice blue eyes, she gritted her teeth and snapped back up to glare at Saderia, a low, deadly growl rumbling in her throat.

Fear shot through Saderia, but she refused to back down. She had to keep fighting. For Dash's sake, if for nothing else. Her heart beat faster. Taking a shaky breath, she forced herself to glare back at Lolista with gritted teeth, her paws trembling but her gaze never wavering. A low growl rumbled in her throat and fire blazed in her narrowed amber eyes. "You'll pay for what you did to Dash!"

"Why?" With a cold sneer, Lolista spat in her direction and let out a humorless snicker. "Are you mad you didn't get to stab him in the back yourself—like you do to all the other animals in your so-called kingdom?"

Saderia bared her fangs in a furious hiss. Feeling her blood burn with rage, she lunged toward the lioness as fast as she could, her claws outstretched and her fangs bared in a snarl. Lolista moved faster, though. A

second before Saderia slammed into the sneering lioness, Lolista leapt away in a flash of creamy yellow fur. Saderia's eyes opened wide. Unable to stop herself, she flew straight through open air with a loud shriek of alarm. Knocked off balance, she crashed down onto the stone where Lolista had stood just moments ago and stumbled clumsily across the ledge, desperately trying to catch her fall. Her eyes grew wide with shock. Frantically, she gazed out at the ledge around her and felt her heart skip with fear when she saw no one. Where was Lolista?

“You think you’re so tough, Princess.”

Saderia jumped at the sound of the icy cold snarl. With a gasp, she whipped around to face the source of the voice and felt her heart stop in horror.

In a flash, Lolista leapt up to the ledge towering right over her head and stalked up to the very edge to leer down at her, her fur bristling and her tail lashing wildly back and forth. Her eyes blazed with a crazed, burning sense of rage and hatred, and she bared her fangs in a deafening snarl. “But did you spend *months* living off just a few measly scraps of food—all the while waiting to become food *yourself*?!”

With an earsplitting roar of fury, Lolista shot off the edge of the ledge and flew down toward Saderia in a wild blur of bristling fur. Saderia never had time to react. Before she could make a single move, Lolista slammed into her with a harsh crack that knocked the breath from her throat. Driving her claws deep into Saderia’s shredded shoulders, Lolista knocked her off her paws and slammed her back hard against the rough, jagged ledge. Pain shot through Saderia like a lightning bolt as her head snapped back against the rock. Gritting her teeth, she desperately reached up to dig her claws into Lolista’s shoulders to try to push her away, but the lioness refused to budge.

Snarling at the top of her lungs, the lioness leered down at her with wide, crazed blue eyes, her wild screams growing louder and louder with each word. “Did you spend every day wondering if you were going to *die* because of those *things*? Did you spend every second *fearing* for your life? Did you have to *sneak* around like a piece of prey in your own home just to survive? Did you have to fight for your *pathetic* life when one almost caught you?!?”

Screaming at the top of her lungs in a raw voice Saderia could barely even understand, Lolista bared her fangs in a wild snarl. Ignoring Saderia's desperate attempts to escape, she drove her claws deep into the tiger's shoulders, turning her orange fur red with blood. Before Saderia could do a thing to fight back, she pulled her up off the ground, then slammed her back down again. Over and over again, Lolista slammed her into the hard, craggy stone, smashing the back of her head into the rock as hard as she could. A shrill cry of pain burst out of Saderia's throat, but Lolista's furious snarls drowned it out. Barely noticing her desperate attempts to break free, the lioness smacked her head into the stone without stopping, her blazing blue eyes boring into Saderia's.

Pain burned through Saderia's entire body. Desperately, she tried to fight back, but with every slam, her attempts grew weaker. Dizziness swept over her as her head cracked against the stone again and again, turning the world to a blur around her. Lolista's burning ice blue irises seemed to swim before her eyes as everything spun around her. A shaky gasp whispered out of her throat, but she couldn't hear it. Blood streaked out across her eyes as the lioness slammed her into the stone again and again. Just as her entire body blazed with pain, her vision started to blur. Blackness splashed out across her eyes and slowly darkened her vision. Her paws fell limply to her sides, unable to fight back any longer. Slowly, her head drooped back and her mouth opened in a silent cry as she started to slip into unconsciousness. Blackness seemed to overwhelm her all at once, dragging her deeper into the shadows and away from the pain. Her entire body went limp.

Just before Saderia sank into unconsciousness, she felt Lolista throw her back onto the stone one last time and leave her there. The lioness's heavy pants breathed through the air along with her wild, humorless laughter. Intermingled with shaky gasps, Lolista's soft, eerie voice whispered in Saderia's ear one last time before she slipped off into the darkness.

"You've put on quite the show, Princess. You've passed the first test, and I can't wait to see you tackle the next one." A raw, wild snicker whispered through the air, brimming with equal amounts of hatred and triumph. "Revenge has never been sweeter."

Chapter Twenty

The Next Test

A sharp, frantic knocking on the door stopped Jeb in his tracks. Covered in the dark shadows of the narrow hallway leading to his bedroom, Jeb froze and instantly pricked up his ears, his heart skipping with unease. In a flash, he whipped around and tiptoed back down the silent hallway, then paused when he reached the end. With wide eyes, he peered out across the darkened living room at the rickety old door at the very front of the empty room. Moonlight shimmered in through the windows on either side of the door, illuminating the bare floor and casting shadows across the walls. Jeb's eyes widened in wonder. Who could be knocking this late at night?

On the other side of the living room, his mother suddenly poked her head out around the corner of the hallway across from him. Her blue and gray eyes flashed with unease and distrust in the shadows of the night. Narrowing her eyes, she hesitated in the hallway for a tense beat of silence, then hastily streaked toward the door, her yellow and black-striped fur bristling in the darkness. With a low, warning hiss, she threw open the front door and glared at the animal outside, then almost instantly froze and relaxed. Relief shone in her eyes.

Jeb's eyes widened with curiosity. As quietly as possible, he slowly crept out of the hallway and slipped closer to the door, pricking his ears to listen. In the thick silence of the night, he could just barely make out the soft sound of Makero's voice. He froze in surprise.

The King's voice floated in from outside, strained with tension and worry and oddly soft even in the tense quiet. "Jati...I know it's late...but have you seen Saderia and Dash?"

Jati frowned and tensely narrowed her eyes, her face illuminated by the silver glow of the moon. "No. Why?"

"They're missing."

At the sound of Makero's low, anxious growl, Jeb's eyes widened. Feeling his heart beat faster with fear, he hastily took a step forward,

struggling to hear the King's soft voice.

Even without seeing him, Jeb could sense the fear and worry in his tense voice. "It's already nighttime, and they've been gone for hours." A low, worried growl rumbled in Makero's throat. "They didn't come home from school, and they haven't returned even now—we haven't seen them since this morning. We tried looking for them, but they're nowhere to be found around here." He paused, then lowered his voice to a tenser growl tinged with desperation. "Could I speak to Jeb? He might have some idea where they are."

Jati frowned and nervously flicked her tail. "Well, he just went off to sleep, but..."

"I'm awake!" With a wild gasp, Jeb instantly shot out across the living room and skidded to a stop in the doorway right next to his mother, illuminated by the bright glow of the moon. Ignoring Jati's look of surprise, he looked up at Makero with wide blue and green eyes, his fur bristling and his tail lashing wildly with fear. He hardly dared to breathe. "Saderia and Dash are missing?"

Standing just outside their door in the darkness of the night, Makero looked up in surprise, then slowly narrowed his eyes. Worry and fear glimmered in his bloodshot green eyes and his fur bristled in the chilly night air. Quickly, he nodded. "Yes. Do you have any idea where they might be?"

Jeb's mind whirled with panic and confusion. "They...When we got out of school, they said they were going to our club. Er...We found this place out in the woods, and we've been going there each day for a while to explore it. Nothing bad has ever happened there before, but...maybe they're somewhere around there."

Makero's eyes flashed with hope. Flattening his ears, he eyed Jeb tensely, his tail lashing wildly back and forth. "Where is this place?"

Struggling to remember through the haze of panic clouding his mind, Jeb gestured vaguely out into the dark woods beyond the clearing surrounding his home. "I...I think you have to go through the woods in the direction of the town, then go off to the west. Keep going straight through the woods for a while, and eventually, you'll find more woods, but...darker...and thicker. I think you'll know it when you find it. If you go far enough, you'll eventually find this really thick patch of woods denser than

any other one around here. Go through that, and you'll eventually break out in a clearing with a lake. Once you get there, just follow the river into another dense patch of woods. When you get out of that woods, you'll see a waterfall and a valley. They said they'd be somewhere around that valley, investigating something."

Makero nodded quickly, his green eyes flashing with hope and gratitude. "Thank you, Jeb. My family and I will go there right away to check it out." He paused, then narrowed his eyes with a tense, cautious frown. "On the chance that they're not there, though...could you perhaps do me a favor and go to the desert to see if they're there or if Dingo knows anything? I don't know why they would be there, but I'd just like to make sure."

Without stopping to think or giving himself time to fear the idea, Jeb nodded quickly, his heart pounding wildly in his chest. "Sure, I'll go there now. I'll find Dingo, and if they're not there, we'll come back here to look for them."

"Thank you." With a grateful smile, Makero hastily dipped his head, his fur still bristling with urgency. Without another word, he cast one last, quick glance back at Jati and Jeb, then whipped around and shot off across the clearing into the dark woods surrounding it. In a flash, he dove into the shadowy bushes bordering the back of the clearing and vanished into the darkness with nothing more than a sharp rustle of leaves. In seconds, he was gone.

For a heartbeat of silence, Jati stared after Makero in surprise, then slowly narrowed her eyes. With a deep scowl, she snapped around to look at Jeb and tensely lashed her tail, her voice dark and stern. "You're *not* going to the desert," she hissed. "You could get hurt."

Jeb narrowed his eyes. Trying to ignore the wild, fearful pounding of his heart, he gritted his teeth and cast his mother a tense, apologetic look out of the corner of his eye. "Sorry, Mom. But I have to." Before Jati could protest or stop him, he lunged away from her in a sudden flash of movement. Ignoring her sharp hiss of annoyance and fear, he took off running as fast as he could, leaving her far behind even as she raced to catch up with him. In a flash, he dove into the dark shadows of the woods and forced himself to run faster, determined to get to the desert quickly and make sure Saderia and Dash were all right.

Moonlight shone down on the dark, rolling sand dunes, casting shadows across the vast desert land. Jeb raced through the darkened desert as fast as he could, his heart pounding wildly in his chest and his fur bristling with fear. Illuminated by the bright silver glow of the moon, he raced across the gritty desert sand frantically, desperate to find Dingo as fast as possible. Trying to control the wild beating of his heart, he flew through the sand dunes in the direction of Dingo's camp, hoping beyond hope that he was going the right way. After visiting his friend's camp so many times, he knew the way by heart, but he couldn't help but feel uneasy in the sheer darkness of the night. Shadows seemed to leer out at him with every dune he bounded over, making the normally sunny desert seem oddly eerie and cold. A shiver raced down his spine.

Biting his lip, Jeb forced himself to move faster. In a flash, he dove over the top of a tall, shadowy sand dune and stumbled out onto the gritty land below it, then froze. Without warning, a low, deadly growl rang out from the shadows around him, making him stop in place. All the fur along his back rose up in alarm. With a gasp, he whipped around to face the source of the sound, his heart beginning to beat faster. His eyes instantly snapped to a pitch black sand dune towering just a few paces away from him and his breath caught.

His heart thumped wildly in his chest. "Wh-Who's there?" Hardly daring to breathe, he eyed the sand dune nervously, then dared to speak up in a soft, hopeful voice. "Dingo? Is that...you?"

"*Dingo?*"

A loud, cutting voice sliced through the silent night air, making Jeb freeze in place. Before he could react, a dark, lanky dog with wild, bristling brown fur leapt to the top of the sand dune just in front of him, his cold blue eyes flashing with fury and disgust. Another dark brown dog with glinting yellow eyes and a light brown canine with brown eyes stalked to the top of the dune just behind him, their eyes narrowed and their fangs bared in deadly growls. Low snarls rumbled in the three unkempt canines' throats. Slowly, the three unfamiliar dogs crept down the side of the dune, inching closer to Jeb. All three of them eyed him coolly, their mouths curling up in wide sneers and bloodthirsty grins. Their eyes glinted with hunger in the dim light.

The lead dog wrinkled his nose and curled his lip up in a gruesome sneer. “You thought we were *Dingo*?” He let out a low growl and spat on the sand. “You’ll pay for thinking we were that worthless coward!”

“Yeah!” The dark brown dog stalking just beside him grinned and let out a low, dangerous cackle. “We’ll make you wish you had never come out here, *freak*.”

The light brown dingo let out a cruel snicker and a growl. “We’ll show you not to come into *our* territory!”

Slowly, the three dogs started to stalk toward him, letting out low, eerie chuckles and grinning wide, bloodthirsty grins. Their fangs flashed in the faint light of the moon and their eyes glowed with bloodlust. Cackling softly to themselves, they crept closer and closer to Jeb down the side of the sand dune, their eyes never leaving his.

Jeb’s eyes widened in terror. Letting out a shrill shriek of fear, he stumbled backward as they crept closer, his fur bristling and his heart pounding wildly with fear. Feeling almost frozen in terror, he struggled to stagger away from them, but his paws refused to move. One by one, the dark dingoes crept closer and closer. Fear shivered through Jeb in a wave of icy cold, making every hair on his back stand on end. His heart raced so fast he could barely feel it. Staggering back, he struggled to force himself to run away, but every step he took backward, the dogs took another step forward. Their eyes glittered with bloodlust in the eerie light of the moon. Slowly, they bared their fangs in low, threatening chuckles and growls. All three of them crept closer and closer, bunching their muscles to spring. Right before they leapt on him, though, they froze. Without warning, a loud, bellowing howl sliced through the air, stopping all three of them in their tracks.

“Oh, so it’s your territory now, is it?”

With a furious growl, a shaggy brown dog leapt to the top of a low sand dune just a few steps to the right of Jeb and the three snarling dingoes. With a gasp, Jeb whipped around to face him in time with the three mangy dingoes and gasped when he recognized him.

Dingo stood at the top of the low sand dune just a few paces away from them, his light brown eyes flashing with fury and his fur bristling wildly along his back. Lashing his tail coldly through the black night air, he bared his fangs and let out a low, dangerous growl. Anger flashed in his narrowed brown eyes, seeming to glitter even more brightly in the pale light

of the moon. Slowly, a shaggy red dog and a sleek yellow canine stepped up to stand beside him, their yellow eyes narrowed in fury and their fangs bared in low, deadly growls. Bristling wildly and bunching their muscles, Rip and Lightning glared down at the mangy dingoes in front of Jeb, daring them to take a step closer.

At the head of the snarling crowd of pack members, Dingo bared his fangs and lowered his voice to a dark, deadly growl. “Stay away from him, and get out of *my* territory!”

With flashing light brown eyes, he started to stalk down the sand dune, never tearing his eyes off the three mangy mutts or lowering his dangerous growl. His two companions slunk down the dune after him, their fur bristling with rage and their growling voices tinged with danger.

Dingo’s older brother curled his lip at the three dogs and let out a deadly chuckle as they inched closer. “Yeah, you won’t get the upper hand this time. We’ll beat you, so if it’s a fight you want, then prepare to die, *outcast scum!*”

Lightning flattened his ears and raised his voice to a deadly growl, his fur bristling and his eyes flashing with anger. “Run away, or we’ll teach you not to mess with the pack.”

The three outcasts hesitated when the crowd of pack members stopped just steps away from them. While his two comrades narrowed their eyes and nervously took a step back, the lead outcast scowled and gritted his teeth, his cold blue eyes glinting with hatred and rage. Uneasily, he took a step back with his companions, but forced himself to stay. Baring his fangs, he glared at the three pack members and let out a low snarl, but his growl was tinged with nervousness. Clearly, he hadn’t anticipated a full-scale fight.

Nervously, he eyed the three pack members with flashing blue eyes and bristling fur, then tensely took a step back. Struggling to hide his unease, he glared at the pack members and sharply lashed his tail. “You’re a disgrace, Dingo. You and these fools you dare call pack members!” Gritting his teeth, he spat at the desert Leader and curled his lip. “Of course you would just let any freak wander our land without consequence! We should fight you right here and now and end this pathetic life of yours!”

Dingo stared coldly back at the outcast, his eyes glittering with anger. His voice dropped to a low growl tinged with such danger that even

Jeb shivered. “What makes you think you’ll win, outcast? I’d say we have more than enough forces to take you down right now. And considering you were just threatening a close friend of mine in my own land, that gives me more than enough grounds to destroy all three of you.”

The outcast instantly took a step back, his eyes wary and his fur bristling with unease. Even as he nervously crept back with his outcasts, though, he narrowed his eyes and glared at Dingo, his tail lashing with hatred. “You think you’re so great, Dingo!” As if trying to convince himself that he wasn’t afraid, he gritted his teeth and let out a furious snarl. “We’re matched three on three! We could kill all of you right now! All of you pathetic wimps!”

Before Dingo could reply, Rip curled his lip and let out a mocking laugh. “Yeah, right! You forget who you’re talking to, idiots! We could wipe the sand with you! All you are is a bunch of weak, pathetic fools scuttling aimlessly across *our* sand like a bunch of idiotic scorpions. We’ll crush you in an instant.”

The outcast gritted his teeth, his paws shaking with rage. “Give me a break! You fools alone aren’t anything! You think you’re so tough? You’re nothing!”

“Apparently, I was enough to take down your pathetic Leader,” Dingo growled back, his voice icy cold and deadly calm. “Two of them, in fact. Should I add you three to the count?”

Rage flashed in the outcast’s cold blue eyes. While his companions bared their fangs with wild, furious snarls, the lead mutt flattened his ears and gritted his teeth in an enraged growl. “You scum! We should fight you all here and now—even if we don’t win, we could at least kill one of you! Maybe that freak,” he added, spitting in Jeb’s direction and curling his lip when the kraguer leapt back with a yelp. His eyes flashed in the darkness. “That would make it all worth it.”

Dingo coolly stared back at him, his eyes narrowed but eerily calm. “What makes you think you’ll kill one of us?”

The outcast curled his lip in a sneer, trying to hide his unease with a cold scowl. “We’re evenly matched, idiot. As tough as you think you are, we can still destroy you.”

Dingo arched an eyebrow. “Really?” His gaze flicked to something behind him, then snapped back to the three outcasts, gleaming with a dark

sense of knowing and triumph. His cold light brown irises flashed in the shadows of the night and his voice dropped to a low, deadly snarl. "What makes you think we're alone?"

The instant the words left his mouth, a soft, dark growl rang through the shadowy desert, sounding even lower than Dingo's and tinged with danger.

Jeb's eyes widened in shock at the same time the outcasts' did. With a gasp, he whipped around to face the source of the snarl and froze, his heart skipping with disbelief.

A few paces away from them at the top of the low dune Dingo and his companions had raced out from, a tiny black pup stood wreathed in the shadows of the night. Covered in darkness, the pup's pitch black fur nearly blended in with the night around her, making her almost impossible to see. Only her flashing amber eyes shone through the shadows. With a jolt of shock, Jeb realized the low snarling was coming from her. If he hadn't known better, though, he would have never realized it. The shadows of the night hid her so well he doubted any of the outcasts would even notice her there. And even if they did, they would never believe the dangerous snarl was coming from her. Unlike her normally high-pitched voice, her growl was much lower and deeper than even he could have imagined. The dark air around her seemed to ring with its dangerous sound. Jeb's eyes widened in shock. As he watched, a slow, eerie sneer crept across the pup's shadowed face.

The three outcasts instantly snapped their heads up and whipped around to search for the source of the sound, their eyes wide with panic and their fur beginning to bristle in alarm. Desperately, they searched for the source of the noise, but couldn't find where it was coming from. All the color seemed to drain out of their faces. Slowly, all the fur along their backs began to rise up in fear. Panic gleamed in their eyes and their paws shook nervously against the sand. With wide eyes, they struggled to see where the growl had come from, but couldn't see anything through the shadows. All three of them took a staggering step backward with bristling fur. Their faces only seemed to twist with more and more panic with each second that ticked by.

Slowly, Dingo took a step forward. At once, all three outcasts snapped around to face him, their eyes wide and their faces stark with fear.

Dingo calmly met their stunned gazes and arched an eyebrow, his face dark and his voice deathly soft and threatening. “Go ahead and attack if you think you can win. It’s your choice.”

The outcasts stared up at him in shock. For a split second, they watched Dingo with wide, frightened eyes. While the others shivered nervously behind him, the lead outcast stared at Dingo in disbelief. For a tense heartbeat of silence, he stood deathly still without saying a word, seeming to debate what to do and whether to call his bluff or not. After what felt like ages, the dog cast a quick glance back at his companions, then snapped back to look at Dingo and scowled. Narrowing his eyes, he gritted his teeth and let out a low, reluctant growl tinged with fury and hatred. “All right, *Dingo*. You win this time...but it will be the last time!”

Spitting at the ground, the outcast whipped around and flew away from him in a quick flash of speed. With his companions close behind him, he tore off into the desert as fast as his paws could carry him, letting out a long, furious howl. Keeping their tails tucked between their legs, all three outcasts charged away from the pack members and lunged over the top of the sand dune they had sprung out from. In an instant, all three of them stumbled behind the shadowy dune and disappeared into the vast, dark desert around them, out of sight and out of mind.

For a tense heartbeat of silence, Dingo stared after the outcasts with dark, narrowed eyes, then slowly turned around to face Jeb. A dark shadow crossed his face. Gritting his teeth, he took a step closer to the tiny creature and narrowed his eyes with a stern growl when Jeb whipped around to face him. Dingo’s eyes flashed with annoyance. “What are you doing out here at *night*?” he demanded. “Didn’t I tell you it’s dangerous out here in the dark?”

Jeb winced and shrank back under his fiery gaze, his heart still pounding with fear and his mind whirling with panic. “S-Sorry,” he squeaked. “I...I forgot that that’s when the outcasts attack. But...I had to come and get you!” His eyes widened with panic and his heart thumped faster in his chest. “We need your help! Saderia and Dash are both missing, and they might be in danger!”

Dingo’s eyes widened in surprise. At once, his stern expression vanished into a tenser, more urgent frown tinged with fear. “Saderia’s

missing?" His eyes narrowed and a worried scowl crossed his face. "Her and Dash both?"

"Yes." Nervously, Jeb flicked his tail across the sand, his heart pounding with urgency. "They're not here in the desert or back at your camp, are they?"

"No." Dingo's eyes narrowed and a grave shadow flitted across his face, making his bristling fur seem even darker in the shadows of the night. With a dark scowl, he opened his mouth to say more, then broke off when a soft, high-pitched voice interrupted him.

"The Princess tiger is missing?" In a flash, the tiny black pup darted down from the sand dune just behind them and shot past the three pack members in a wild streak of black. Instantly, she skidded to a halt right beside Dingo and stared up at Jeb with wide, glittering eyes. A strange gleam that seemed a little too shrewd shimmered in her cold amber irises. Slowly, a wide, knowing sneer curled up the corners of her mouth. "They went to that place, didn't they?" With a soft growl that was almost quieter than a whisper, she glanced at Dingo out of the corner of her eye and raised an eyebrow with a wide grin. "I told you to stay away from that place. I told you it was dangerous. And it looks like I was right, now doesn't it?"

Dingo shot her a deadly glare. "This is no time for bragging or joking around, Bunny. What are you doing following us anyway?"

Bunny flattened her ears and testily lashed her tail. "You could be a little more grateful to me for playing along with your little ploy to fake out the outcasts. If I hadn't convinced them, you might still be shredding each other's fur now. Not that I would have minded seeing them get ripped apart."

Dingo narrowed his eyes and shot her a long, dark glare. "Regardless, you shouldn't be out here. Why did you follow us?" Before Bunny could speak up and protest, he just shook his head and cut her off with a low growl. "Never mind. I don't want to know." Tearing his eyes off the tiny pup, he looked back at Rip and Lightning and nodded toward the dark sand dune he had come from. "You two, take Bunny home and look after the pack for me while I'm gone. Tell Thunder what's happened. I'll be in the forest helping Jeb look for Saderia and Dash, and I won't return until I find them. Understand?"

While Lightning nodded hastily, Rip narrowed his eyes and dipped his head with a dark shadow of understanding on his blood red face. "Yes, Dingo."

"Good." With a dark, serious frown, Dingo slowly looked back at Jeb and narrowed his eyes, his expression tense with worry and determination. Without hesitating, he nodded to him and flicked his tail toward the dunes around them, his voice dark and firm. "Lead the way, Jeb. Let's go find them."

Pain burned through Saderia's aching body, seeming oddly far away but making her wince in her sleep. Flattening her ears, she slowly forced herself to open her eyes, feeling as though she were fighting currents to break out on the surface of a vast ocean. When her eyes finally fluttered open, the dull burn that had lurked in the background suddenly blazed up hotter than ever. With a sharp hiss, she winced and squeezed her eyes shut, her heart suddenly pounding with pain and fear. Her whole body ached with agony.

Gritting her teeth, she slowly forced her eyes open and made herself look back at her wounded body. The instant the blurriness faded from her vision and her eyes focused, she nearly winced again. Deep wounds covered her entire body. Bloody scars sliced through her fur all along her sides and legs, and scratches crisscrossed her face. Bruises hid beneath her messy orange fur, stinging along with the burning wounds. Her muscles ached with pain and exhaustion, lending a dull sense of numbness and weariness to her entire body. Dried blood clung to her unkempt orange fur, making it stick out in messy clumps. Its sick, acrid scent curled up to her nose as she looked back at herself, nearly making her gag.

Saderia curled her lip and tried not to shudder. Tearing her eyes off her bloody body, she slowly looked back down at her paws and nearly jumped. Tight, scratchy ropes had been tied around her front paws again, binding them to one another and making it impossible to move. When she tried to move her back paws, she could feel more tight ropes bound around them. A shiver traveled down her spine as she stared down at the scratchy ropes. Slowly, her heart began to beat faster as the last hint of her exhaustion disappeared in a swirl of fear and panic. Where was she?

Slowly, she lifted her aching head to look up at the area around her and froze. Her heart skipped with fear. All around her, hard, cold stone walls rose up to a rough ceiling just above her head. Shadows covered the craggy gray walls, casting creepy, flickering patterns across the jagged stone. Hard stone formed the floor of the small cave-like room. Jagged and craggy, the floor was anything but even. Sharp edges of stone poked out of the ground and drove into her stomach and paws, making her body sting with pain and discomfort. On either side of the tiny room, two small holes carved into the walls led off into strange pitch black tunnels that Saderia could barely see the beginnings of, much less the ends. An icy chill seemed to hang in the musty, old air, making her fur bristle with cold. The entire cave was silent.

A shiver raced down Saderia's spine. What was this place? Even as the nervous thought swirled through her mind, an even darker thought flickered through her head. Where was Dash?

Feeling a sharp jolt of alarm, Saderia whipped around at once, her heart starting to beat faster. Instantly, her eyes fell on a clump of bloody dark brown fur lying slumped against the ground just a few feet away from her. Her heart skipped. In a heap of messy brown fur and blood, Dash lay right across from her on the opposite side of the tiny room. Blood drenched his messy brown fur, and deep scars and gashes tore open his skin all over his back, sides, legs, and face. Every part of him was marred by some sort of scar or bruise. Ropes had been tied around his front and back paws all over again, stained with blood just like his fur. His head lay slumped listlessly against the ground and his eyes remained shut, but as Saderia watched, his sides shakily rose and fell with several soft, harsh breaths. Relief glowed in her eyes. He was alive. Hurt, but alive.

Slowly, Dash's eyes fluttered in his sleep. Wincing, he gritted his teeth in a low, painful groan and slowly forced his eyes open, blinking sleep and exhaustion away. With a bewildered frown, he lifted his head and slowly looked around. His dull amber eyes only seemed to grow darker with confusion as he gazed out at the eerie cave around him. With wide eyes, he gazed around at the rocky gray walls, then slowly looked down at his tied front paws. Bewilderment flashed in his eyes a second before realization seemed to dawn on him. With a gasp, he slowly lifted his head

higher, his eyes growing wider and brighter as the memories flashed through his mind.

Panic flashed across his face. With a shaky gasp, he whipped around to find Saderia and froze when his eyes caught hers. His eyes widened in surprise and his paws trembled with equal amounts of pain and fear. A strange glow lit up his amber irises, seeming torn between fear and relief. “Saderia!” With a choking gasp, he stared up at her with wide, stunned eyes. “Are...are you okay?”

Saderia hesitated, then managed a tense nod, her heart pounding with worry and fear. “Yes, I’m fine...Are you?”

Dash blinked several times, then slowly looked down at his paws and tried to hide a shiver. “Yeah, I...I think so...”

“Aw, how sweet.”

At the sound of the soft, icy voice, Saderia snapped up to face the source of the sound and felt her breath leave her in a gasp. Beside her, Dash whipped around to face the source of the voice and froze. Saderia’s eyes widened in shock. Her heart skipped a beat.

Lolista stood in the shadowy entrance to the tunnel on the left side of the room, her ice blue eyes glinting through the darkness. A wide sneer curled up the corners of her mouth and her whiskers twitched with amusement as she gazed down at the two bound animals. Draped in the darkness of the tunnel right behind her, her tail flicked lightly back and forth and her eyes shone with triumph. An eerie, knowing gleam seemed to light up her entire face.

Saderia’s eyes widened in shock, then narrowed in fury. Gritting her teeth, she glared at the lioness with every bit of strength she had and spat at her paws, trying to hide the shakiness in her voice. “Lolista! Let us go! You’ve tortured us enough!”

“One can never torture *you* enough.” With a snort and a roll of her eyes, Lolista leered down at her and raised an eyebrow. “You might as well save your breath, Princess. I have no intention of releasing you, and I think you know that.”

Saderia narrowed her eyes and shot her a long, cold glare, then bitterly turned away. With dark, nervous amber eyes, she glared down at her paws, struggling not to show her fear. From the other side of the room, Dash looked up at her and winced when he saw the tense expression on her

face. Narrowing his eyes with equal amounts of pain and concern, he stretched his bound paws across the floor to touch her paws to calm her down, but couldn't reach her.

Raising an eyebrow, Lolista glanced back and forth between them and let out a cold chuckle, her grin souring. "Cut the cute act," she snapped, sending them both a dark glare. "Hate to break it to you, Princess, but the power of friendship isn't going to get you out of this one."

Saderia shot her a withering glare out of the corner of her eye, then just turned away and rested her head wearily on her paws, her eyes dark. She never said a word.

"Aw, the poor Princess is depressed." With a cold snicker, Lolista rolled her eyes and stepped closer to Saderia to give her a sharp prod in the side. "I didn't think you would give up this easily."

Saderia winced, but ignored her and turned away. Not wanting to give her the satisfaction of seeing her hurt, Saderia avoided her eyes and kept her expression dark and blank, hiding any sign that she was bothered.

Dash couldn't hide his own fear. Wincing, he glanced at Saderia for a long moment, then shakily whipped around to look back up at Lolista, his tail lashing wildly back and forth. With eyes shimmering with fear and panic, he stared up at her without looking away, his face stark with worry and his breath short. "Lolista...Mom..." Desperately, he stared up at the lioness and forced himself not to look away. "What...What are you going to do to us?"

Lolista smiled and lightly flicked her tail. "Ah, so you want to hear about the next test."

Dash silently cursed himself for encouraging her insanity, but before he could stop himself, he found himself blurting out the question he desperately wanted answered. "What is it?" The second the words left his mouth, he felt like kicking himself. If the ropes binding his paws hadn't prevented it, he probably would have. *Why* did he have to keep encouraging her? Even as he silently hated himself for asking the question, though, he felt tense with anticipation, practically dying to know the answer. As much as he hated himself for asking, he desperately needed to know what would happen next.

Lolista raised an eyebrow. With a wide, eerie sneer, she stalked closer and leered down into his nervous eyes. Her voice dropped to a soft,

ominous whisper that seemed too loud in the silence of the cave. “I’m going to leave you in here,” she murmured. “For days. This is probably the last you’re going to see of me for a while because I’m not going to return here to feed you two.” With an extravagant flick of her tail, Lolista gestured to the small room around them and raised her eyebrows. “Look around you. There are only two ways out of here, and each tunnel on either side of you is filled with millions of different passageways that branch off into millions of other passageways in an enormous network of tunnels that—unless you have experience navigating them—will render you completely and utterly lost. Unless you manage to pull some amazing trick, Princess, you’ll eventually die of starvation, wandering alone in one of those tunnels. Or perhaps you’ll lose your mind first. Or fall victim to whatever might lurk in the darkness. Either way...you’re not going to make it out alive.”

With a cold snicker and a flash of her fangs in a cruel grin, Lolista turned around to slip back into the dark passageway behind her, raising her tail in farewell. “Enjoy your stay, Princess, and good luck passing the test!” Her voice echoed through the eerie, silent tunnel as she slipped into the passageway behind her. In a second, she slithered into the tunnel and disappeared into the shadows. In a flash, she was gone.

Saderia stared after her for a long moment, her narrowed eyes shining with equal amounts of fury and terror. For several tense heartbeats of silence, she stared at the tunnel where Lolista had disappeared, then made herself tear her eyes away. Letting out a long, weary sigh, she let her head slump down onto her paws and closed her eyes. A low groan escaped her throat. “How did this happen?”

Dash let out a long sigh and flattened his ears, his worried amber eyes boring into hers. “It’s...It’s okay, Saderia,” he murmured, trying to keep his voice as calm and convincing as he could. “We’ll get out of this.”

Saderia slowly raised her head with a weary breath. “I hope you’re right.” She paused, then narrowed her eyes, a sudden blaze of fire lighting up their bright amber depths. Gritting her teeth, she lifted her head and looked out at the dark room around her, her heart beating faster and her fur beginning to bristle all along her back. Determination flashed in her eyes and she lowered her voice to a growl. “We’re not going to save ourselves and get out of here by lying here doing nothing. Come on. Let’s break out of these stupid ropes.”

“Anything?” With a tense, tired frown, Dingo looked up from a thick clump of undergrowth, his tail lashing and his eyes narrowed with concern. The shaggy desert dog stood in a dense patch of woods, searching helplessly through miles of towering trees and thick undergrowth for any sign of Saderia and Dash. Weeds and grasses had already snaked their way up his legs and tangled themselves in his fur, but this time, he didn’t care. The only thing he cared about was finding Saderia and Dash.

A blinding glimmer of early morning sunlight flashed through the thick trees in the dense forest, slowly lighting up the shadowy land and casting the darkness away with a bright, painful yellow glow. Dingo flinched as the morning light flashed in his eyes and illuminated the dark forest. He and the others had been searching all night long and hadn’t found a thing...and now it was already morning and he had nothing to show for hours of searching.

A few feet away from him, Jeb looked up from a thick clump of brush, his blue and green eyes worried and his entire body drooping with exhaustion. “N-No,” he stammered. “I haven’t found any clues that might lead us to them. Have you?”

“No.” With a dark scowl, Dingo gazed out at the forest, his expression tense and troubled. Narrowing his eyes, he scanned the dark woods around him, knowing that somewhere in the shadows of the dense forest, Karenisha, Makero, Cia, and Jash would be searching, as well, spread out far away from each other so as to cover more ground. A deep scowl crossed his face. For a tense moment, he eyed the dark woods with a frown, hoping beyond hope that he would catch a glimpse of his missing friends but knowing he wouldn’t. A long sigh escaped his throat.

“Where are you?” he murmured as the sun burned tauntingly in the sky.

Saderia let out a low groan and flexed her muscles, trying not to wince. After fighting desperately to break through the ropes binding her paws and finally managing to break free, her entire body seemed to scream in pain. Agony burned in her weary muscles, but she did her best to ignore it. Letting the last bits of shredded rope fall to the stony floor, she wearily

rose to her paws and looked around with a shaky breath, tensely examining the tiny room surrounding her.

Beside her, Dash shakily pushed himself to his paws, shaking off the last few scraps of rope clinging to his legs and trying not to wince. Gingerly, he pressed his paw against one of the bloodiest wounds on his shoulder and flinched. Rapidly pulling his paw away, he eyed his bloody fur with tense amber irises, then slowly looked up at Saderia, his pleading gaze boring into her fur. “Saderia? This...blood is really gross, and these wounds hurt a lot. Can’t we take a moment to...clean ourselves up or something?”

Saderia narrowed her eyes and sharply flicked her tail, her expression dark with tension and unease. “You heard Lolista,” she muttered. “These tunnels are hard to navigate, and if we want to get out before we starve to death, we need to move fast. Now is no time for cleanliness. We just have to endure the pain and get through this.”

Dash sighed, but managed a meek nod. “You’re right.” He paused, then glanced at the two tunnels on either side of the room and shivered, a dark shadow flitting across his face. “Which way do we go, though? I mean...Lolista went that way, and we’re not going after her, are we?” Nervously, he gestured to the dark tunnel on the left wall of the tiny room.

Saderia frowned, a dark, uneasy shadow creeping across her face. “I don’t know. I’m trying to think to figure out which way we should go. On one hand, it seems smarter to go the other way so we don’t run into Lolista. But then again, she might *want* us to think that. What if she purposely tried to influence us to go that way so that when we did, we’d wind up at a dead end?”

Dash frowned and narrowed his eyes in thought. After a tense moment of silence, he cautiously looked up at Saderia and eyed her with a tense, wondering look, his tail flicking nervously back and forth. “Can you maybe use your instinct to tell us which way to go?”

Saderia blinked and looked up at him in shock, then smiled a wide, hopeful smile. “Dash, that’s a great idea! I can’t believe I didn’t think of that! I almost forgot about my instinct after everything that’s happened. I’ll give it a try.” Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath and struggled to ignore the wild pounding of her heart, knowing she needed to be calm. With all of her concentration focused on finding the right path, she cast her consciousness out into the area around her, willing it to find the right

tunnel. After what felt like ages, she felt a tiny, almost unnoticeable tug lure her toward the tunnel on the right side of the room, warning her of its danger but urging her to start moving.

Her eyes flew open. Instantly, she snapped around to face the tunnel on the side of the room opposite the side Lolista had disappeared off into. Her heart slowly started to beat faster with equal amounts of fear and determination as she gazed into the dark, shadowy depths of the tunnel. Her eyes narrowed. “It worked. We need to go this way.” A low, dark growl rumbled in her throat and her eyes flashed with fire. “Let’s get going. And let’s hurry. We’re going to get out of here, but we need to do it fast.”

Thick darkness hung over Saderia like a heavy blanket, making the air seem even more stifling. Trying not to shiver, she padded through the dark, narrow tunnel with Dash close behind her, struggling to see through the shadows but never succeeding. She couldn’t see two steps in front of her. Pitch black shadows covered the tunnel all around her, making it impossible to see anything. When she looked down at her own paws, all she saw was blackness leering up at her. It felt as though she were stumbling through a never-ending void of darkness—never getting anywhere, just continually walking in place.

An icy cold chill hung in the old, musty air. Every part of her felt frozen with cold and her fur shivered even though there was no wind. The deeper into the tunnel she crawled, the colder and darker it seemed to get. A disgusting rotting scent seemed to linger in the dusty air around her, making her wrinkle her nose every time she took a breath. The stale air was so thin and stuffy she could barely breathe. Every breath she sucked in tasted rancid, like ancient dust instead of air.

Saderia’s body ached with pain. The tunnels were narrower than she could have ever guessed. Both hard, craggy walls scraped against her sides with every step, their jagged edges slicing through her skin and irritating her wounds. The ceiling hung low over her head, brushing the tips of her ears when she dared lift her head higher. In an effort to avoid hitting her head on the ceiling, she had no choice but to hunch down and almost crawl across the uneven, jagged stone floor—a stance that only made her aching muscles ache more. Every part of her body seemed to burn with pain. After

a few hours of stumbling aimlessly through the dark tunnels, she felt like she was about to collapse.

Her mind whirled at the thought of how long she had been in the tunnels. Surrounded by nothing but darkness everywhere she turned, she found it almost impossible to tell how many hours had passed—or had it been days already? She was already finding it hard to tell the difference. After traveling through the shadows for so long, she no longer knew how to find her way back. Too many times to count, the long passageway they followed had forked off into two new tunnels. At each crossroads, she had been forced to pick a tunnel based on which direction her instinct seemed to tug her in. With as close together as the tunnels were, sometimes it was hard to tell which way her Dream sense meant her to go. All she could do was pick as best as she could and hope with all her heart that she had chosen the right direction and that the tunnels would eventually lead her *somewhere*. Anywhere but here.

A shiver raced through her bloody fur, making the burning wounds all across her body ache with renewed pain. Every part of her felt as though it were breaking down with every step. Her muscles stung with exhaustion and her bloody wounds seemed to burn with each second that passed. Hunger clawed at her stomach. Her entire body seemed to grow weaker and weaker with each new hunger pang that racked her body. Every now and then, she heard her stomach growl through the silence around her, longing for food. She didn't think she had ever wanted to eat as much as she did in the darkness of the tunnel.

A long, shaky sigh escaped her throat. Struggling to keep her wits about her, she forced herself to keep moving, determined not to slow down. With trembling paws, she felt her way across the icy cold crags in the stone below her, feeling her way through the darkness. The sharp edges of the hard stone floor beneath her dug into her paws with every step, but she struggled to ignore it. Trying not to let her fur brush against the narrow stone walls, she felt her way through the shadows as fast as she could, then winced and jumped back with a yelp when something slimy scuttled across her paw. A shiver raced down her spine as the soft pitter-patter of tiny legs whispered through the tunnel just below her.

“Saderia?” Out of the corner of her eye, Saderia glanced back to see Dash look up at her. His amber eyes shone with worry through the darkness,

the only part of him she could make out. His voice seemed to echo through the overpowering silence, too loud in the darkness of the tunnel and cracking on every word. “A-Are you okay?”

Saderia shivered, but managed a weak nod even though he couldn’t see it. “Yeah...I’m fine. I just...thought I felt something. Let’s keep moving.”

“Oh...” Dash’s eyes dropped to the ground behind her, the only indication that he had looked down to keep following her. His quiet words whispered through the silence. “I’m so hungry...”

Saderia winced and tried to ignore the ache in her own rumbling stomach. “It’s all right,” she murmured. “Don’t worry. We’ll get out of this soon, and then we’ll find something to eat. I promise.”

Dash didn’t respond. With a weary sigh, Saderia lowered her head and kept walking.

Hours passed by. With each step she took into the dark, shadowy tunnel, the walls seemed to grow narrower and narrower. They seemed to close in on her as she stumbled deeper into the musty passageway. The air seemed to grow even thinner and staler the farther she went, making it harder and harder to breathe. Her heart beat faster in her chest with every second that passed by. Fear burned in her mind, and her fur bristled wildly with tension. As she moved, the walls seemed to scrape against her wounded sides more and more, sending shivers of pain through her bloody fur and making her wince. It seemed as though the walls were trying to squeeze her to death.

Her entire body only grew tenser and tenser as her sense of claustrophobia grew stronger. The deep darkness all around her made it even harder to keep breathing and moving. The shadows made it impossible to see what was around her, where she was going, and what might lie in wait in the darkness of the tunnel. A shiver raced down her spine. Still, she made herself keep moving.

With every second she spent in the shadows of the tunnel, Saderia only regretted her decision to follow the narrow passageway more and more. Hopelessness and fear seemed to infect her with every step she took. More than just the icy air made her fur stand on end. Surrounded by nothing but a world of darkness and hard stone, she felt like there was no way out. The tunnels were truly endless and she would die inside them, or else face

an eternity of darkness, never seeing the light again. The thoughts swirled through her mind with every step, making her heart beat faster and her breath come out in shorter, fearful gasps.

Part of her actually missed the small open space where she and Dash had woken up in what felt like a whole other time and age. She would have preferred anything to this dark, tight torture, but she kept those thoughts to herself. Knowing there was no turning back, she forced herself to keep moving without a sound, enduring the walls scraping against her wounded sides and the chill hanging in the air that seemed to infect her very blood. With her last scrap of willpower, she made herself stay silent, not wanting to alarm Dash with her fearful thoughts. It was only the knowledge of his warm presence behind her in the cold, dark tunnels that kept her sane. He was the reason she hadn't broken down already. She wanted to be for him what he was for her—a way to endure the torture.

Another few hours passed in silence. Saderia couldn't even begin to count how many. Without a single word, she and Dash padded wearily through the narrow tunnels, their paw steps echoing through the overpowering silence in perfect unison. What seemed like every few hours but what might have been every few seconds, Saderia found herself looking back over her shoulder with her heart fluttering madly in her chest. In the darkness around her, she found herself wondering constantly if Dash was still behind her or if he had disappeared into the shadows. Every time she looked back, though, she found him walking along right behind her—but just barely. The bright glow of his dull amber eyes was the only part of him she could see, the only indication that he was still with her. Somehow, each time she looked back, she only felt more afraid. The hours passed by in silence.

After what felt like ages, Dash slowly looked up at her, his amber eyes boring into her back. For a tense moment of silence, he didn't say a word. Then after what could have been seconds or years, his soft voice finally whispered through the silence, seeming too loud in the darkness surrounding them. "Saderia? What time do you think it is...out there?"

Saderia took a deep breath and let it out slowly, hating how her own voice cracked in the silence around her. "Probably nighttime. I think..."

She thought she heard Dash shiver behind her. Another moment of silence passed until Dash's shaky voice whispered through the darkness

again, even softer than last time but seeming even louder all the same.
“Saderia, are we going to die in here?”

“No.” Narrowing her eyes, Saderia glared at the darkness ahead of her with every bit of anger she had left, willing away the pain, exhaustion, and hunger dulling her mind. “We’re going to make it out of here, Dash. We just have to be strong.”

Dash let out a soft, shaky breath. She could practically hear his paws trembling with weakness against the stone. “All right.” With a weary sigh, he made himself speak up in a voice no softer than a dying breath. “At least...At least we’ve got each other right now.”

Saderia managed a weak nod, grateful that Dash couldn’t see the pain and fear on her face in the darkness around her. “You’re right,” she whispered, struggling to keep her voice strong. “We’ve got each other. And we can survive this. Let’s keep moving.”

When she looked back, she thought she saw the silhouette of Dash nod his head in agreement. Without a word, he followed wearily after her and didn’t slow down, his amber eyes dull in the shadows around them. He didn’t bother to speak up again. Trying not to shiver, Saderia turned around and made herself keep moving, determined to get out of the tunnels alive.

Saderia didn’t know how many hours passed as they moved deeper into the nightmare passageway, but she was sure it had to be a lot. The longer she crawled along the sharp, rough floor, the dizzier she got. She seemed to fade in and out of consciousness as she stumbled through the darkness, but even if she collapsed during her moments of unconsciousness, she wouldn’t have known it. Her hunger pangs, the burn of her wounds, and the scrape of the rugged walls, floor, and ceiling all seemed to fade into the background—painful but dull aches that seemed eerily far away. Time seemed to pass so sluggishly it was like she wasn’t even moving at all. Everything looked the same—sheer blackness all around—so she had no way of knowing whether she was actually making any progress at all. For all she knew, she could just be walking in place, forever getting nowhere. After a while, time stopped mattering to her.

Several hours passed, and it was as if no time at all had whirled by. Apart from having to decide on which new passage to take when the tunnel forked, nothing else seemed to change. The world around her seemed to grow gradually narrower and narrower with each step, though she wondered

if it was just her imagination. It was only when a soft, faint scuttling sound whispered through the dark tunnel around her that it occurred to her that any time had passed at all.

A jolt of fear shot through her, snapping her awake and making her look up in surprise even though she knew she couldn't see anything. The soft skittering noise seemed to grow louder, filling the entire tunnel with the odd, eerie sound. All the fur on Saderia's back stood on end. Slowing down, she eyed the darkness around her helplessly, wondering where the sound was coming from. With every small step she took, the noise only seemed to echo out louder than before.

She thought she heard Dash shiver behind her. His voice sounded tense with fear and nervousness. "Saderia...What's that sound?"

Saderia pricked her ears and tried not to shiver, feeling an eerie sense of dread and fear in the back of her mind. Nervously, she shuddered in the cold air of the tunnels, but merely shook her head. "I don't know. But whatever it is, we have to keep going. Come on."

Behind her, Dash took a deep breath, but didn't stop. With him following close behind her, Saderia took a breath and made herself keep moving, determined not to give up.

Inch by inch, the two crawled deeper and deeper into the tunnel without stopping, surrounded by nothing but dark, craggy walls. Slowly, the scuttling sound in the distance grew louder and louder and closer and closer until it echoed off the walls. With a tense frown, Saderia made herself keep moving with Dash close behind her. The eerie skittering noise only grew louder with each step.

After several hours of walking, it seemed to reach its loudest. The wild scurrying sound seemed to echo through the tunnels, disturbingly loud in the darkness of the passageway. With a jolt of alarm, Saderia realized it wasn't just loud. The eerie noise seemed to echo around her from every single direction—up, down, left, and right. It wasn't just her imagination. The noise rang out from every angle. When her sides pressed up against the narrow walls, it wasn't jagged, craggy stone she felt, but cold, hard shells that seemed to shift and tremble against her. With a slow, dawning sense of horror, Saderia realized it wasn't just her mind playing tricks on her. The walls around her were trembling. And the floor beneath her had started to move.

“Saderia!” Dash’s terrified shout rang out through the wild scuttling sound, seeming oddly far away. Saderia barely heard him.

Bugs and spiders crawled all throughout the tunnel around them, turning the sides of the tunnel to nothing but walls of skittering insects and making the floor move beneath their paws. An enormous sea of insects covered the floor beneath Saderia. So many of them moved together in a swarm so thick she couldn’t feel the stone beneath them. Her paws stumbled over legions of skittering bugs with a sharp, sickening crunching sound, struggling to keep their balance as the floor of bugs moved and shifted beneath her. Insects crawled up the walls all around her, prodding at her fur when she stepped too close and making it impossible to feel the stone beneath their hard, tiny bodies. Every time she stumbled too close to the wall, they seemed to latch onto her fur and slither up onto her body. Crawly creatures dropped down from the ceiling above her head and scuttled out across her back, burying themselves in her bloody fur and making her skin crawl at their touch.

A shiver raced down her spine. Feeling sick to her stomach, Saderia squeezed her eyes shut and clamped her fangs down hard to bite back a scream. Desperately, she tried to ignore the tiny legs crawling all over her body and shake off the eerie sensation of the tunnel moving around her—a tunnel of bugs. The scuttling sound of tiny legs moving across the floor and the sickening crunching noise that echoed out every time she took a step rang in her ears, but she forced herself to block it out, desperately trying to keep calm. Dash wasn’t as strong.

“Saderia!” With a shrill gasp and a yelp of fear, he stumbled through the tunnel behind her, almost jumping through it to try to avoid the sea of bugs on the ground beneath him. His harsh, panicked gasps rang through the air over the scuttling of the bugs, seeming louder and more breathless each second. His voice shook with every frightened cry he let out and every single breath he took. “Saderia! There’s...”

“I know.” Gritting her teeth, Saderia forced herself to keep moving and tried to hide a shiver as tiny insects crawled up her legs and skittered along her back and sides, prodding at her skin and tangling themselves in her fur. Her voice shuddered out in a harsh growl as firm as she could make it. “It...It’s just gravel. From the walls.”

“No!” Dash’s terrified cry rang through the tunnels, sounding oddly shrill, strangled, and weak. “No, it’s...”

“Just pretend!” Saderia shouted, feeling her legs tremble and her voice quiver with fear and disgust. Her voice shook on every word and her heart skipped every time her paws crunched another wave of bugs, but she made herself keep moving. “It’s just gravel, Dash! Just don’t think about it! Now come on! Keep moving!”

Dash’s terrified sob echoed through the darkness. “I don’t want to! I want to go back! I want to go home!”

“Just don’t think about it! Just run!” Gritting her teeth, she shot forward into the dark, bug-filled tunnel as fast as she could, her shrill scream almost drowned out by the echoing scuttle of tiny legs all around her. Disgusting crunching noises sounded around her everywhere she stepped and her paws felt dirty with the damp shells of bugs, but she forced herself to ignore it all. Doing everything she could to ignore the sick crunching sounds and the scuttling noises all around her, she raced across the moving floor as fast as she possibly could in the narrow tunnel. Insects crawled up her legs with every step she took until her own fur seemed to move with them, but she made herself ignore it. As quickly as possible, she crashed through the disgusting tunnel, willing Dash to follow behind her.

“Saderia!” Dash’s whimpering voice rang out behind her as he struggled to keep up, his breath strained with horror and exhaustion.

“I’m right here!” she shouted back, trying not to shudder when something big and hairy dropped onto her nose and crawled up her muzzle. Shaking her head to throw it off, she moved quickly through the tunnel, willing her aching legs to move faster and faster. Her heart hammered wildly in her chest and her voice came out strangled and breathless, but she never stopped running. “We’ll make it, Dash! Just keep going!”

“I don’t want to do this!” he sobbed behind her, his voice almost muffled by the scuttling of the bugs. “I don’t want to be here!”

“Then keep moving, and we’ll get out!” she shouted, her own terror making her voice sharp. “Trust me, Dash! We’re almost there!” Even though she had no idea how long this would last and how much she and her terrified friend could take, she forced herself to sound confident. Behind her, Dash let out a muted sob but kept running. Saderia forced herself to do the same.

Ignoring the shivers that raced through her body as tiny legs tiptoed along her bloody back, hooked their way up her legs, and burrowed into her fur, Saderia kept running, focused only on getting out. If she dared break her concentration and stopped for even a second to think about what was happening, she was afraid she wouldn't be able to make it.

"I'm scared, Saderia!" Dash's voice echoed through the darkness and seemed to bounce off the walls around her, trembling on every word. "Please! I want to get out of here!"

"We're almost there!" she shouted. Gritting her teeth, she looked up just in time to see the faint silhouette of a fork in the tunnel loom up ahead of her. When she realized she could hear less scuttling sounds coming from the left tunnel that branched off of the insect-filled passageway, she didn't even hesitate. With Dash close behind her, she dove into the quieter tunnel and forced herself to run faster, desperate to leave the crawly creatures behind. "We're almost there!" she panted, struggling to get her words out and trying to hide her terror. "Just keep moving! We're...We're going to be fine!" The words were her only lifeline as she flew down yet another dark tunnel, never knowing where it would take her.

Her eyes grew wide with fear and desperation. "We're going to be fine, just fine!" Trying to convince herself as much as him, she let out a wild, shaky gasp. "We're going to be fine, Dash! Everything's going to be fine! We're going to live!"

Chapter Twenty-One

The Game Plan

A light spirit wandered slowly through the darkest, deepest parts of the desert of the spirit world, her light brown eyes searching frantically for the one who seemed so desperate to elude her. As she wandered through the shadowy sand dunes, her mind whirled with thoughts of Saderia and her friends. Vaguely, she wondered what was going on in the living world and what her friends were up to. More than likely, they were going about their usual routine. After all, the spirit hadn't seen any danger when she had last peered into the living world, and she saw no reason why Saderia couldn't handle herself without her guidance. Legions of animals before her had managed to get by without spirit guides.

Even so, Claw had a sinking suspicion that something was wrong. Her desire to return to the living world to check on Saderia only increased with each step she took deeper into the spirit realm. Still...she had been searching for Dastarius for so long that it felt like a waste to abandon the search now. Besides, she wasn't even sure she knew how to get back to her normal perch over one of the Seeing Circles that peered down into the living world—or even where the closest Circle might be. With a nervous frown, Claw kept moving to continue her journey into the darker parts of the land of the dead, unable to stop herself now. In time, she would return to the living world to check on Saderia. After just a few more hours of searching...

Saderia crumpled to the ground with a long, painful sigh. Her mind whirled with exhaustion and pain and her stomach ached with hunger. She wasn't sure, but she had a sinking suspicion that at least one or two days had passed since she had first set out into the dark passageway. Yesterday—or maybe the day before—she and Dash had managed to escape from the bugs and had done their best to shake off the ones that had clung to their fur, but even now, she wasn't sure the insects were all gone. That was one

of the many things she preferred not to think about. When she pushed it to the back of her mind, it disappeared in an instant, swallowed up by much more pressing fears and issues.

Compared to all her other problems, the bugs would almost be welcome substitutes. As the hours—and days—passed by, Saderia only felt herself growing more and more hopeless. She never slept once, too terrified of closing her eyes in the overwhelming darkness. After spending so long walking without eating or resting once, she was so exhausted that she felt light-headed. Had she actually been able to see anything other than darkness, the world would probably be spinning around her. Her stomach felt like a huge, gaping hole of nothingness that ached with every step. The hunger pangs made her feel so disoriented that in weak moments, she found herself stumbling through the passageways in a state that was something more than asleep but less than awake. She wasn't sure, but she thought she might have passed out once after they had escaped the bugs.

Dash seemed to have calmed down since the bug incident. Since they had escaped the insects, he had barely said a word and had just kept walking along behind her, which she thought meant that he had calmed down. Even so, he was obviously still spooked. When the rare spider would scuttle across his paw, she could still hear him jump with a squeak of alarm right behind her. While he was still unnerved by the incident, Saderia had managed to push it out of her mind and calm down enough to keep moving. Always keep moving.

What gave her the will to keep going was a mystery to her. Hopelessness seemed to radiate from her like rays from the almost forgotten sun, yet she still managed to hold her head up and keep walking. As she crawled along the rocky surface of the passageway, some instinct inside her told her not to give up. Perhaps her will to live was just too strong. Even though the thought of giving up might just be a welcome idea at that point, she just couldn't. Even though resting for just one minute might ease her tiredness and help her overcome her light-headedness—and escape her pain—she just couldn't do it. To rest for even a moment was just like giving up. And she refused to give up.

Keeping her head high and refusing to give in to her exhaustion, Saderia kept moving, determined not to let her fear get to her. As bravely as she could, she wandered deeper into the darkness, constantly feeling her

way along the hard, craggy rock and no longer caring when the jagged edges tore into her already bloody paws. She could no longer feel it. Just as her vision started to blur with exhaustion, she took a step forward, then paused, feeling a jolt of surprise shoot through her and snap her out of her haze. For the first time in forever, something seemed different in the shadowy tunnel. Instead of the usual cold, craggy stone that sliced her skin, her paw brushed against something smoother and rounder but just as hard as the stone jutting up beneath her.

A dark frown crossed Saderia's face. Pausing, she leaned down to inspect what she had stepped on, wondering what could possibly be strewn about in a sickening place like this. While Dash paused behind her and peered curiously over her shoulder, she slowly passed her paw over the object, trying to feel what it was since the darkness hid it from sight. To her surprise, she found two large, round holes near the top of the rounded object. Her eyes narrowed. Slowly, she ran her paw over the object again to trace the shape of it, then froze. Something suddenly clicked and her heart skipped with horror as realization dawned in her mind. When she leaned closer to examine the object, hardly daring to believe what she knew to be true, she jumped back with a terrified scream, her heart racing wildly in her chest.

"Dash!" Her voice leapt out in a wild, strangled scream mingled with terror and shock. "It's..." With a shaky gasp, she trailed off and gaped at the object sitting right in front of her, her heart pounding and her eyes wide with fear. It was still dark, but now that she knew what it was, the object seemed to shine straight through the shadows, haunting her.

A skull.

Dash's eyes widened in shock when he saw what she had. Freezing in place, he stared at the skull with wide eyes and swallowed hard, his gaze flashing with fear. Tensely, he reached forward to rest his paw on Saderia's shoulder and touched her gently with his tail, trying to keep his voice soft and comforting even as horror gleamed in his eyes. "It's okay," he whispered. "Just...Just pretend like it's not there. Just don't think about it, Saderia. Now come on. Let's keep going. Once we're past this thing, we'll be fine."

Saderia shivered, but managed a shaky nod and forced herself to believe him. Believing his words was her only hope of overcoming her

sudden fear.

Feeling sickness rise in her throat, she took a deep breath and forced herself to slip soundlessly past the skull. With all of her willpower, she made herself keep moving through the thick, impenetrable darkness and struggled to push the skull to the back of her mind. Just as she tried to forget it, though, her paw brushed against another oddly smooth, round object in the middle of the usually craggy floor. When she leaned down to study what she had stepped on, her eyes went wide and her heart froze with horror. Lying beneath her paw was a cracked, dirty white bone.

Her heart skipped a beat. "Dash..." she whispered, her breath catching with fear and her paws going numb with horror.

"It's okay," Dash choked out in a voice as calm and even as possible even though it cracked on every word. "We're...We're probably almost out. We'll get past this somehow. Just keep walking."

Saderia forced herself to nod even as her heart pounded and her stomach churned with sickness. Taking a shaky breath, she forced herself to step over the bone and keep walking deeper into the tunnel, never daring to stop. Even as she walked, though, her mind whirled with dozens of tense, horrified thoughts. What if she and Dash *didn't* get out? What if she became nothing but a pile of bones lying broken in these horrible passageways? A violent shiver raced down her spine.

How had these bones gotten here? The thought almost made her want to vomit with fear and realization. Just how many animals before her had ended up in this place and died? And how had they died? Had they starved, unable to find a way out? Or gone out of their minds? Or fallen victim to some terrible beast in the darkness? She shuddered at the thought. Forcing the questions out of her mind, she urged herself to keep moving, but between her light-headedness and fear, her resolve had already begun to crumble.

A soft whimper escaped her throat when her paw brushed against another smooth, chipped bone in the middle of the passageway. With a shudder, she tried to step past it, then felt her heart freeze with horror. Right after the dirty old bone was another one. When she tried to step over that one and keep moving, there was another. And another. And another. With every step she took, her paw only brushed against more smooth white bones cracked with age and dirtied by time. After a few seconds of walking, she

couldn't even feel the rocky floor beneath the bones. With a cold feeling of horror, she realized the floor was *made* of bones.

Dozens upon dozens of long, smooth white bones stretched across the craggy rock from one side of the tunnel to the next, forming a rough floor. Even the walls were made of bones. When Saderia stumbled too close to one of the walls, her fur didn't brush up against the usual jagged crags jutting out of the wall. Instead, her sides brushed up against smooth, cracked bones. For all she knew, the ceiling could have been made of them, too, but she didn't dare raise her head to find out. Skulls and stray bones lay scattered on the very edges of the smooth, ribbed floor in the shadows of the walls, eerily white in the darkness of the tunnels. Saderia couldn't walk without touching the ancient bones. With every step she took, her paw cracked the floor of bones beneath her, splintering them with a sickening crunch that made her stomach lurch.

Horror swirled through her mind and her empty stomach churned with disgust. Even as her breath grew hoarse and shallow with fear, though, she made herself keep moving. Using every last bit of her strength to force herself not to look at the bones, she made herself keep moving, trying not to wince when the floor of bones splintered with a loud crunch at her every step. A shiver raced through her fur.

"Dash," she whimpered. "I want to get out of here..."

"We will get out of here," he whispered back, his voice too soft in the overpowering silence hanging over them and his words tinged with too much fear of his own. "Just...Just keep moving. We'll get through this."

Saderia gritted her teeth and forced herself to nod, then winced and shuddered when a sharp crackling noise sounded under her paws, marking the splintering of another bone. Her heart lurched with horror. With all of her willpower, she tried not to think about the bones she was cracking or the animals they might have belonged to in the past. The thought of it almost made her vomit even though there was nothing in her stomach. Silently, she whispered a quick apology to the spirits of the animals the bones must have belonged to in her mind and did everything she could not to think about it.

Hours passed by in the tunnel of bones. No matter how much Saderia willed herself to get over it, she couldn't. Shudders of horror ran up and down her spine each time her paw crashed through another bone with a sharp splintering noise and each time the bones creaked beneath her with a

sound that seemed to infect her mind and never go away. A low whimper breathed out of her dry throat. “Dash...”

“It’s okay,” he whispered. Resting his tail on her back, he made himself keep moving behind her, hiding the fear in his own eyes and keeping his voice as steady as possible to stay strong for her. “We’re going to be okay.”

Saderia just nodded and squeezed her eyes shut, hoping with all of her heart that he was telling her the truth.

“It’s been three days since they went missing.” With dull green eyes, Makero gazed out at the shadowed woods around him, his face dark against the dying orange rays of sunlight shooting out over the forest. While the sun sank closer to the horizon, Makero stood tensely in the middle of the thick, dark forest, gazing absently out at the trees and hardly daring to blink or breathe. Every part of him felt weak with equal amounts of pain, exhaustion, and fear.

Beside him, Karenisha shivered and gazed out at the forest with dark amber eyes, her face grim and nervous. “They’ll...They’ll be all right when we find them, won’t they?” she whispered, her voice just barely audible in the tense silence of the forest.

Makero narrowed his eyes and turned to face her with a deep, serious frown, trying to hide the doubt and worry in his own clouded eyes. “Yes, Karenisha,” he growled, keeping his voice as calm and even as possible. “We will find them, and they will be all right.”

While Karenisha just nodded and looked down with a quiet sigh, Makero narrowed his eyes and darkly turned to look out at the forest. At the sound of a sharp crunching noise and the rustling of bushes behind him, he instantly whipped around, feeling his heart leap with hope. “Saderia?” Even though he knew it wasn’t her, he couldn’t help but feel a jolt of hope at the soft sound in the quiet forest. When he turned and saw who it was, though, his hopes plummeted.

Dingo and Jeb stepped out from the dense undergrowth behind him, their faces tense and exhausted. Leaves and weeds wound around their paws and covered their fur, but neither seemed to notice. With dark, exhausted brown eyes, Dingo looked up at Makero just as he and Jeb stumbled to a clumsy halt in front of him. While Jeb’s head practically

drooped down to the ground and his eyes fluttered with exhaustion, Dingo looked up at Makero with a dark frown and gravely shook his head. “There’s still no sign of her and Dash,” he muttered. “Have you...?”

“We haven’t seen her.” With a long, weary sigh, Makero looked down at his paws and shook his head, his eyes clouded with pain and worry. “We haven’t seen Dash either.”

Dingo let out a long sigh and slowly turned back to face the woods around him, his light brown eyes dark with grimness and worry. His tail lashed tensely back and forth and a low growl rumbled in his throat. “Where could they possibly be?”

Makero just shook his head and flattened his ears, a dark shadow on his face. “I don’t know.” His green eyes shimmered with hopelessness and burned with frightened tears, but he forced them back, not wanting to alarm Karenisha or Saderia’s closest friends. A dark scowl crossed his face. Taking a deep breath and struggling to push back his doubts, he lifted his head and gazed out at the shadowy forest around him. With strength he didn’t know he had, he forced himself to speak up in a voice as calm and even as he could manage, determined not to give up.

“We’ll find them,” he growled, his voice tense and firm. “We just have to keep looking.”

A day had passed by in nothing but thick, stifling darkness and musty air. Or at least, that was what Saderia assumed. She barely even remembered to keep track of time anymore as she slouched through the narrow passageway, struggling to take in each musty breath of air and make her weary heart keep beating. It had been at least three or four days since she had gotten any sleep at all. Or had it been longer? She couldn’t tell anymore. Everything in her mind seemed to fade away to a blur as dark as the shadows around her.

Agonizing pain still burned in Saderia’s bloody wounds and stung in her malnourished stomach, but due to her dizziness, the agony seemed to have all but faded into the background. Her entire body felt so numb she could barely even feel her own legs, much less the stinging pain in the wounds covering her body. With every step she forced herself to take deeper into the darkened passageway, she became even less aware of her own paws moving. She simply couldn’t feel them anymore. It was as if she

were wading through water in an odd dream that took her out of her own body. Only instead of water in a dream, it was darkness in a nightmare.

Blearily, she stumbled through the passageway alongside Dash, her fur brushing up against the dried blood still clinging to his body. Some time ago, the passageway had started to widen instead of narrow. At first, it had only made her hazy mind even more confused, and the world had seemed to warp around her, but now she was grateful for it. The path had widened just enough to allow Dash to squeeze up beside her and pad alongside her. Both their sides brushed up against the craggy walls, but neither of them could feel the sting of the jagged rocks digging into their skin any longer. All they could do was keep moving, practically delirious with pain and exhaustion.

Some time ago, they had managed to escape the tunnel of bones, though when Saderia looked closely, she could still see a few bones and skulls littering the tunnels in the shadows of the walls. She tried not to think too hard about it. So overcome by hunger, pain, and exhaustion, she could barely even muster up the energy to fear the bones any longer. Even the overwhelming darkness and the acrid air around her no longer fazed her. Her heart had beat so fast over the past few days it no longer had the energy to speed up. Her fur prickled with fear, but she could barely feel it. Her terror had given way to sheer exhaustion that seemed to numb both her and everything around her. It was hard to even think past her tiredness. Part of her felt like she was going to collapse any minute and never wake up. The most terrifying part about that thought was not actually the thought itself, but the fact that she was so far gone that the idea was almost welcoming to her. She didn't even have the energy to fear it.

Just when she felt she couldn't take another step, Dash's stunned voice suddenly sliced through the thick, ancient air and broke through her thoughts like a rapid flash of lightning. "Saderia! Look! I...I think I see... light!"

Saderia's eyes widened and her head instantly snapped up in shock. Hardly daring to breathe, she made herself look up at the darkness ahead and froze. For the first time in what felt like years, she could see something other than blackness. It wasn't even light—at least, not the kind of bright, welcoming light she remembered. It just *wasn't* darkness.

Somewhere up ahead, the darkness seemed to grow ever so lighter. The air around her now seemed somehow less dark. For the first time, she

could just barely see the outline of the rocky floor beneath her and the silhouette of the crags jutting out of the walls and ceiling. Everything around her was still a blur of darkness, but for the first time, she could just barely see *something*. It only seemed to grow lighter up ahead. Somewhere at the very end of the tunnel, she couldn't see light, but she could see an area of darkness somehow lighter than the darkness she was in now—the closest thing to light she could ever hope for.

Her heart skipped with hope. "A way out!" Hoping beyond hope that it wasn't just her imagination, she suddenly shot forward, her heart pounding with renewed strength and her mind whirling with desperation. As fast as she could, she darted through the narrow tunnel with Dash close beside her, heading desperately toward the light. With every step, the lightened area seemed to grow closer and closer. The crags around her slowly started to take shape. Hardly daring to breathe, Saderia made herself run faster, forgetting her pain, her exhaustion, her hunger. All she cared about was getting free. Her eyes locked on the lightened area and never left it even to blink, as if she was terrified that if she looked away, her only hope of salvation might be snatched away before her eyes.

Before she even realized it, she suddenly shot out of the end of the tunnel in a wild flash of bristling orange fur. Her heart skipped a beat. With a stunned gasp, she skidded to an abrupt halt, her heart pounding and her eyes growing wide with shock. Out of nowhere, the enclosing walls of the tunnel suddenly stopped and fell away. All around her, tall light gray walls opened up and spread out into a wide room. Shaped almost like a bowl, the hard, craggy ground seemed to slope upward to form the curved walls rising up all around her. Oddly smooth, the hard stone walls curved up to a tall ceiling towering far over her head. In the very center of the wide ceiling, a huge hole carved straight into the rock peered up into the outside world.

Silver moonlight filtered in through the hole in the ceiling, lighting up the wide room with a glow of light that seemed blindingly bright to Saderia's eyes. Even so, she didn't care and she never once closed her eyes even when they burned at the sight. A soft glow seemed to light up the entire rounded cavern, making it possible to actually see for the first time in ages. Instead of the old, musty air that lurked in the tunnels, a crisper, lighter air filled with the scent of dew and fresh forest life floated down from the ceiling. Crickets chirped somewhere outside, breaking through the

thick silence. From where Saderia stood, she could just barely see a few sprigs of dewy, moonlit grass springing up around the wide hole—her first glimpse of the upper world in what seemed like a millennium. If she strained her eyes, she could just see the dark, starry night sky towering somewhere far overhead. The upper world—a world away from the dark, terrifying tunnels—was still there. She had found it.

Relief washed over Saderia like a tidal wave, freezing her in place right outside the entrance to the tunnel she had just left. With her back turned to the dark passageway, she gazed out at the open room in shock, hardly daring to believe her own eyes. Her heart beat so fast she couldn't feel it at all, and her eyes glowed with a joy she hadn't felt in ages. "Dash," she whispered, her voice cracking as she gasped for air, almost unable to breathe. "Dash...We made it! We're free!"

A soft, stunned gasp of relief sounded behind her, as shaky as her own. With wide eyes, Saderia turned to look back at her friend and froze. At the same time that she looked at him, Dash turned around to look up at her from where he stood right beside her. Their eyes locked. For the first time in a very long time, they could actually see each other.

They looked horrible. In all his life, Dash had only looked as bad as he did now a handful of times—times she had hoped she would never have to relive. Deep scars covered his entire body. Gashes lined his sides and scarred his legs, while lighter cuts crisscrossed his face and muzzle. Dried blood covered his entire body from head to toe, making it almost difficult to see his original dark brown color. The old blood splattered his mane and pasted it to his face, while the rest of his fur stuck out in gruesome clumps of dried blood around his scars, making him look messier and dirtier than ever before. Dirt and dust clung to his matted fur, making him look oddly dull. Dark bits of what she could only assume were dead bugs stuck to his bloody paws. Altogether, he looked terrible. She doubted she looked any better. Even so, it didn't matter. All that mattered was that they could actually see each other again.

Relief welled up in Saderia's chest, so strong it brought tears to her shining amber eyes. "We're safe," she whispered. Practically stumbling over her words and almost choking on a sudden burst of wild, happy tears, she struggled to breathe as she stared up at her best friend. "We're safe, Dash! We're finally safe! We're not going to die in here!" Tears streaked

down her face and her mouth curled up in a wide smile as a wild, joyous laugh bubbled out of her chest. She couldn't even imagine what she looked like. Even Dingo probably would have called her insane.

Beside her, Dash managed a weak, hopeful smile, his amber eyes gleaming with relief. Hardly daring to breathe, he gazed out at the wide room around them and opened his mouth to speak, then broke off. Shock flashed in his eyes. Without a sound, he suddenly leapt to his paws and stumbled farther into the room, his eyes wide and his fur bristling wildly with shock. His voice shuddered out as a stunned gasp. "Saderia! Look at this!"

Blinking in surprise, Saderia looked up at the sound of his voice and followed his gaze to the other side of the room. Instantly, her heart lurched. Shock flashed in her eyes and her mouth went dry with equal amounts of surprise and sudden hunger. Every part of her seemed to freeze at once.

Sitting right across from her on the other side of the room was an enormous pile of fruit stacked all the way up to the ceiling towering several feet above their heads. Food in every shape, size, and color stood piled one on top of the other right before her eyes, blindingly bright in the shadowy room and even riper and juicier than she could have imagined. Her eyes went wide. All at once, her stomach roared with hunger and her head spun with wooziness and nausea, as if to remind her of how hungry she was. Even as she stared up at the mouthwatering pile of food, though, a strange, dire warning screamed at her not to touch it.

Dash didn't seem to feel the same way. With a bright, hopeful gleam in his eyes and a desperate smile, he took a step toward the pile of food, but Saderia didn't let him get any closer. In a flash, she took a step after him and snapped her paw out to hit him firmly in the chest, stopping him from going any farther. When he whipped around to look at her in surprise, she narrowed her eyes in a dark, stern frown, her expression deadly serious.

"Don't eat that," she growled, her cold amber eyes never leaving his. "Any of it."

Dash blinked several times in shock. "W-Why not?" he demanded, his voice betraying his disbelief. "We're starving, Saderia! We both could be about to collapse any minute now! Why shouldn't we eat the food when it's right here in front of us?"

“Because it’s right here in front of us.” Saderia narrowed her eyes and let out a sharp hiss, her gaze flashing with a tense, eerie sense of knowing. “Don’t you think it’s just a little *too* convenient? Lolista sets us free to wander the passageways after telling us we’ll most likely *starve* to death, and now that we’ve managed to get out of those tunnels, there’s just this big pile of food to welcome us? Yeah, I don’t think so. It’s probably poisoned.”

Dash blinked in surprise, then took a step back, his eyes growing wide with fear and understanding. With a shaky gasp, he whipped back around to look at the pile of food and flinched, as if fearing it might attack him.

“Lolista thinks of this whole thing as a game,” Saderia growled, narrowing her eyes and giving the poisoned pile of food a dark, grim glare. “These are all tests. She doesn’t actually expect us to die this early in ‘the game.’ She wants to torture us. More than likely, she put a whole bunch of other ‘tests’ beyond the tunnels in case we managed to escape them. The poisoned food is probably one of them—a test of character. Lolista knew we would be starving by the time we got out—if we ever did get out—so she put a pile of poisoned food down here to see if we’d go for it and end up killing ourselves. Don’t forget, Lolista’s main goal in all of this is for us to die.”

Dash shivered and nodded nervously, his fur prickling with fear. “You’re right. Let’s...Let’s just get out of here.”

Saderia nodded absently, then froze when she turned to gaze up at the hole in the ceiling. For the first time, she realized how far away the gap in the ceiling was from them—at least a good few feet. A cold, sinking sense of dread slowly crept into her heart, sending a shiver down her spine. “That’s...a good idea, Dash, but...how?”

Dash blinked in surprise. With a bewildered frown, he turned to gaze up at the ceiling, then froze. His eyes grew wide with horror when he realized the gap in the very center of the ceiling was far too high for either of them to reach. All the color drained out of his face. With wide, horrified amber eyes, he snapped around to face Saderia, his fur bristling and his paws starting to tremble against the stone. “What do we do?” His voice choked out in a shaky, strangled whisper that seemed to grow louder and

louder with each word. “I’m not going back in those tunnels, Saderia. I just can’t—”

“It’s okay.” Hastily, Saderia held up a paw to calm him, struggling desperately to think through the haze of hunger and pain clouding her mind. “I...Just let me think. We’ll find a way out of here, Dash. Just let me think for a second.”

“Maybe...Maybe we could try climbing up the walls.” With a desperate, frantic gleam in his eyes, he whipped around to face the wall closest to him and wildly lashed his tail, his voice tinged with a reckless sense of urgency. “Here, let me try!”

Before she could protest, he suddenly shot toward the nearest wall as fast as his paws could carry him. In a flash of bloody dark brown fur, he bounded up the side of the wall, filling the air with the harsh scrape of claws against stone. Rocks and pebbles tumbled down the smooth wall all around him, but he barely noticed. As fast as he could, he struggled to climb up the side of the smooth, rounded wall, but before he had even reached the middle of it, his claws slipped with nothing to grab or hold on to. With a sharp yelp, he slid back down the deadly smooth wall and tumbled to the ground. In a mess of dark brown fur, he rolled away from the wall, his sides hitting the ground hard and his head smacking against the stone with every turn. Saderia’s heart lurched.

As fast as he could, Dash stopped himself and clumsily stumbled to his paws, his eyes flashing with panic and urgency. His legs trembled beneath him and his head seemed to spin with pain and dizziness, but he ignored the agony that seemed to haunt his bloody body. With a shaky gasp, he lurched back toward the wall as fast as he could, struggling to build up enough momentum to shoot himself up it. In a flash, he climbed up the smooth wall and desperately tried to reach the ceiling, but to no avail. A second after he ran up the wall, he slid back down again with a yelp of pain and surprise and crashed down onto the craggy floor in a mess of bristling fur. The jagged floor tore open the gashes all along his sides, but he didn’t notice. Barely stopping to catch his breath, he forced himself to his paws with eyes wide with pain and desperation. As if he could do nothing else, he raced for the wall again and again in a desperate attempt to climb it, but slid down each time, having climbed no farther than before.

Saderia's heart ached with pain and horror as she watched him throw himself at the wall. "Dash, stop it!" Just as he staggered to his paws and started to turn to do it again, she stumbled toward him with a desperate gasp, her eyes wide with horror and agony. Her heart pounded with distress and her mind whirled with dismay as she stared up at her friend, silently begging him to stop this torture. "This isn't doing any good, and I can't watch this anymore! I can't stand here watching you torture yourself! I hate seeing you get hurt!"

Dash whipped around to face her with wide eyes shining with hidden tears, his paws shaking wildly against the floor and his fur bristling with panic. "Then what do we do?" he choked out, his voice strangled with fear. "I don't want to go back through those tunnels! I *can't* go back through those tunnels!"

"We're not going to." Narrowing her eyes, Saderia gave him a firm look, trying to keep her voice as steady as possible. Frankly, she couldn't imagine surviving another few days in those tunnels either, but she didn't let him know that. Glancing up at the ceiling, she studied the gap above her for a tense moment of silence, then slowly narrowed her eyes in thought. "Maybe one of us could jump up on the other's shoulders and try to leap up to it."

Dash's eyes widened and his ears perked up with a desperate sense of hope. "Yeah, that could work!" In a flash, he darted closer to Saderia and crouched down the instant he skidded to a halt in front of her, his eyes shining with hope. "Here, you jump up on my shoulders."

Saderia frowned and hesitated uncertainly. "Are you sure you're going to be able to support me? You're pretty weak after that trek through the tunnels, just like me. Are you sure this is okay with you?"

Dash nodded quickly, his eyes narrowing with seriousness. "Yes, I'll be fine. Just get up. Don't worry about me."

Saderia hesitated for a tense heartbeat of silence, then took a deep breath and let it out slowly, forcing herself to push away her fears of hurting him. Right now, their lives were more important than a bit of pain anyway. Hiding her unease, she carefully stepped up onto his back paw by paw until she stood on his back with her front paws balancing unsteadily on his shoulders. As soon as she stood on top of him, Dash slowly rose up to his paws, making her wince and grit her teeth to hide a cry of surprise. Her

paws wobbled on his shoulders and back, but she forced herself to keep her balance and not fall.

Slowly, she lifted her eyes to the hole right above their heads and winced when she realized it was still so far away. A shiver raced down her spine. Taking a deep breath, she glanced down at Dash and winced, her eyes flashing with fear and guilt. “I...I don’t want to hurt you,” she whispered. “If I have to jump, I’ll have to push down really hard.”

Dash gritted his teeth and flattened his ears, trying to hide the pain in his eyes. “Don’t worry about me, Saderia. Just jump as hard as you possibly can. The sooner one of us gets through that hole, the sooner we’ll both be saved. If one of us gets out, then they can go for help or try to pull the other out. Then we’ll be safe. Then we won’t have to worry anymore.”

Saderia bit her lip with a wince, but nodded weakly. “You’re right. Okay.” She paused for a long heartbeat of silence, then made herself take a deep breath. Summoning every last bit of strength she had, she gazed up at the hole in the ceiling above her and narrowed her eyes, then suddenly leapt up as hard and as fast as she could.

In a flash, she flew toward the ceiling in a quick streak of orange fur, her heart hammering wildly in her chest. Desperately, she reached out with her paws just as she flew closer to the gap in the ceiling, struggling to grab on to the side. A second before her paws touched the grass, though, they fell short. Before she could grab on to the side, she slowly started to fall downward, watching as her route to freedom flew right out of her grasp. Her eyes widened with shock and dismay. With a shrill cry, she plummeted back down to the craggy floor of the cave, her paws desperately reaching out toward the gap. Slowly, it flew farther and farther away as she fell down through the cold night air.

In a flash, Dash leapt up to catch her before she slammed down onto the craggy stone floor. The second she slammed into him with a thud that knocked the breath from her throat, they both collapsed onto the stony floor in a heap of orange and dark brown fur. With a low groan, Saderia slumped back on the floor on top of Dash. Her fur prickled with guilt when she heard his own low growl of pain. Panting for air and trying not to wince in pain, Saderia stumbled clumsily to her paws, her body stinging with agony and her face burning with embarrassment and dismay. “That didn’t work,” she whispered, her voice betraying her fear.

Trying not to wince, Dash hastily stumbled to his paws, his fur bristling with pain and fear but his eyes flashing with determination. “Maybe not, but you got really close.” Desperate hope flashed in his amber eyes and his tail lashed across the stone with a frantic sense of urgency. “Just a little closer and you would have made it. Let’s try it again.”

Saderia glanced up at the hole in the ceiling and winced, remembering all too clearly how painful it had been crashing down to the ground. If Dash hadn’t caught her, it would have been even more agonizing. A shiver of fear and pain raced down her spine, making her eyes grow darker with unease. “Um...”

Dash seemed to read the fear in her gaze. Narrowing his eyes, he faced her with a softer, gentler expression and tensely rested his tail on her shoulder, his eyes glimmering with equal amounts of sympathy and desperation. “Do you want me to try it? I could climb up on your back and jump for it to see if I could make it. I...I don’t want to hurt you, but...in this case, falling to the ground is probably more painful and definitely scarier.”

Saderia hesitated for only a second, then turned around and hastily nodded her head, her eyes gleaming with hope and desperation. “Yes, you try it,” she stammered, unable to hide the relief in her voice. “Maybe you’ll make it, and then you can get help.” As fast as she could, she stumbled out into the beam of moonlight right under the hole in the ceiling and knelt down, her heart burning with urgency.

Dash nodded quickly, hiding the doubt in his eyes. Taking a shaky breath, he gingerly stepped toward her and cautiously climbed up onto her back, placing each paw carefully one by one so as not to hurt her. Trying to avoid touching her wounds, he nervously placed his front paws on her shoulders and his back paws on her back.

As soon as he stood on top of her, Saderia slowly rose to her paws, trying not to collapse under his weight. His paws seemed to bore heavily into her back and shoulders and her entire body ached with the effort of holding him up, but she tried not to show it. Ignoring the sting of her irritated wounds and the violent trembling of her legs, she gritted her teeth and forced herself to stand up as straight and tall as she could. “Ready?” Sensing his worried gaze boring into her back, she narrowed her eyes and furiously lashed her tail. “Don’t even worry about hurting me. Use every

last bit of strength you have, jump as hard as you possibly can, and leap as high as is physically possible to reach that gap. Do everything you can to make it up there. You can worry about me later.”

Dash paused, then nodded miserably, hiding the pain and fear in his eyes. “All right, Saderia.” His voice shook with regret, but hardened with determination. “If I hurt you...I’m sorry.” Taking a deep breath, he gazed up at the gap above him, bunched his muscles, and leapt.

While Saderia collapsed to the ground with a muted gasp, Dash flew up into the air far above her. With blazing, desperate amber eyes, Dash shot toward the gap in a wild streak of dark brown fur, stretching his legs out as far as they could possibly go. In a flash, he soared toward the hole in the ceiling and reached out a paw to grab the side. A second before he started to fall back down, his paw struck the edge of the opening hard and his claws dug in deep. With a strangled gasp, he started to plummet downward, but his paw held tight to the edge. Kicking out wildly with his back legs and dangling over open air, he desperately reached up with his other paw and grabbed the side. Holding on tight with both paws, he struggled wildly through the air, desperately fighting to pull himself up.

Saderia’s breath caught in her throat. Feeling her heart beat faster with hope, she watched as he kicked and fought with all of his might, forcing himself not to let go. Gritting his teeth, Dash struggled with every last bit of strength he had to pull himself over the edge. Digging his claws in deep, he held on to the side of the gap with shaking, bloody paws, his entire body burning with the effort to hold him up. For what felt like years, Dash dangled helplessly from the ceiling, scrabbling wildly at the edge of the hole and pulling himself up farther and farther, inch by inch. After what seemed like ages, he finally hauled himself up and forced himself up through the gap in the ceiling. With a low, painful groan, he pushed himself through the gap with all of his might and stumbled out into the surface world on wild, unsteady paws.

Saderia’s eyes widened with hope. In a flash, Dash pulled himself up over the edge and tumbled out of sight, his sharp yelp of surprise echoing through the silent night air. A second after he disappeared from sight, his face reappeared over the edge of the wide hole, illuminated by glimmering silver moonlight. Saderia’s heart leapt with hope. He had made it.

Shock shone in Dash's eyes and his breath left him in a stunned gasp. "Saderia!" Hardly daring to breathe, he stared down at Saderia with wide eyes, then frantically looked around at the shadowy land surrounding him. Looking almost pale with panic and indecision, he gazed out at the land around him, then snapped back to look at her, his eyes wide with fear and shock. "What...What should I do?"

Saderia narrowed her eyes with a firm, grim sense of resolution. She didn't have to look at the smooth walls all around her to know that there was no way she could possibly make it up to the gap in the ceiling. Even if Dash leaned down to grab her, she wouldn't be able to get close to him—especially not with her sapped strength. Her heart beat faster with understanding and resolve. Taking a deep breath, she made herself look up at him with narrowed eyes, forcing herself to meet his gaze and not look away. "Go get help. I...I'll stay down here and wait for you. Just...hurry! Be back quickly!"

Dash's eyes widened in horror. "I...I can't leave you in this place!"

Saderia gritted her teeth, her eyes flashing with fury and desperation. "You have to! Now go! Find help before Lolista figures out you're free and comes after you!" When Dash hesitated, she gritted her teeth in a furious snarl. "Go!"

Dash stared down at her with wide, horrified eyes. For what felt like ages, he gazed at her in shock, then slowly narrowed his eyes, a dark sense of horror and understanding dawning on his face. Taking a deep, shuddering breath, he stared down at her for a long moment of silence, then gritted his teeth and squeezed his eyes shut, forcing himself to nod with a tense, miserable expression on his face. "O-Okay!" Stumbling over his words, he gazed down at her with agonized amber eyes, his voice cracking as he struggled to be brave. "I'll get help! I'll...I'll be quick! I'll be back before you know it! I...I promise..."

Saderia's eyes narrowed. For a tense heartbeat of silence, their eyes met, both gleaming with a dark sense of knowing and understanding. Tense silence hung in the air as unspoken words passed between them. For a moment that seemed like several lifetimes, Dash stared down into her eyes without a word, then forced himself to look away. Without another glance at her, he made himself turn around. He didn't let himself look back. As fast as he could, he took off running into the shadowy woods surrounding the

gap in the grassy forest floor, leaving Saderia standing alone in the dark. He forced himself not to look back at her. He told himself he didn't need to. He would find a way to save Saderia, no matter what.

In a wild flash of speed, Dash stumbled clumsily through the dense, shadowy woods, his heart pounding with fear and his sides heaving with desperate, trembling pants. The forest whirled past him in a blur of darkness. As fast as he could, he charged past the gnarled pitch black tress towering all around him and shot through the thick, shadowy undergrowth cropping up along the dark forest floor, never daring to stop. The wild sound of rustling undergrowth, snapping twigs, and crackling leaves rang out all around him as he crashed through the forest, but he didn't care. He never once stopped. Willing himself to move faster, he flew through the shadowy trees with reckless abandon, never once daring to pause or look around. His legs screamed with agony at being pushed so hard, but he ignored them and ran faster. He didn't care if his legs hurt from running. He didn't care if he was never able to move again after this. He didn't care if he died. All he cared about was finding help and *fast*.

His mind whirled with wild, panicked thoughts as he flew through the dense trees. More than anything else, he wished it had been Saderia who had managed to get out instead of him. Her instinct could have led her to help. *She* could have done something. *She* could have found help and returned to him in two seconds flat. He, on the other hand, was utterly hopeless. The only thing he could do was pick a direction and run blindly through the woods, hoping beyond hope that it would lead him *somewhere* where he could find help.

His heart seemed to beat faster with every frantic step he took through the pitch black undergrowth. The crisp, frigid night air whipped at his fur, infecting his blood with an icy cold chill he couldn't shake off. Even the faint glow of the moon made his heart beat faster. It only seemed to mock him, as if showing him just how little time he had. Ignoring the wild crashing of his own aching paws through the dense undergrowth, he made himself keep moving, urging himself to run faster. Nothing else mattered anymore. All that mattered was finding help.

His paws thudded roughly against the frigid ground as he charged through the forest, silently screaming at himself to run faster. Gasping for

air and barely paying attention to where he was going, Dash flew through a thick clump of undergrowth with a sharp rustling sound, sending leaves flying up all around him. His heart skipped and his mind burned with the longing to run faster—a longing that screamed out over the agonizing blaze of pain in his legs. Desperately, he whipped around to face the forest surrounding him, trying to figure out which direction to go next and feeling his blood boil with urgency. His eyes instantly locked on a random direction and he started to lurch forward, then froze. Just as he started to step forward, a stern but feathery voice whispered through the silence of the night, making him stop in place.

“Don’t take another step.”

Dash’s eyes widened in shock. Expecting to see Lolista, he whipped around to face the source of the voice with a sharp gasp, then froze. His heart stopped. It wasn’t Lolista who stood behind him.

Just a few steps away from him, draped in the darkness of the night, was a shimmering light brown spirit. Casting a bright, otherworldly light across the dense black forest, the spirit took a step closer to him, her light brown eyes shining with grimness and pain. A light breeze whispered through her, rustling her translucent light brown fur and the shining pink bandana tied around her neck. Soundlessly, she stared at Dash without moving, her expression tense and grave and her eyes clouded with regret.

“Claw...” Hardly daring to breathe, Dash stared up at the shimmering spirit with wide eyes, barely believing what he was seeing. “You...You’re here...”

Slowly, Claw nodded, her eyes grim and eerily dark. “I am.” Her soft, feathery voice seemed to swirl and echo around him when she spoke. Flattening her ears, she bowed her head in shame, her light brown eyes glittering with pain. “I’m so sorry. I only now realized what you and Saderia have been going through, and I’m so sorry I didn’t help you sooner. I know what you two have gone through now, and I regret so much that I made you go through something so horrible without trying to help. Had I known, I would have done something.” She paused, then slowly looked up, her light brown eyes gleaming with determination. “But I’m here to help now.”

Dash’s eyes widened with hope. His legs trembled beneath him and his breath caught in a shaky gasp. Feeling almost light-headed with relief,

he stared up at Claw in shock, barely daring to breathe. “Thank you. Thank you, Claw. Thank you so much...”

Claw only shook her head and flicked her tail to wave away his thanks. “Listen to me,” she growled, her voice low and firm. “I looked down at the area around you from the spirit world, and I know what this woods is like and where everything is in relation to you. Your family and your friends are looking for you, but they are a long, long way away. They’re slowly getting closer, but it would still take a long time for you to go all the way to them and then come all the way back here. Too long. That lioness that did this to you is on her way to the place where Saderia is waiting now. It’s only a matter of time before she gets to Saderia and hurts her. She has a rope hanging around her neck. What you need to do is go and find Lolista before she gets to Saderia. You’ll need to steal her rope—preferably with as little fighting as possible—then lose her and find your way back to Saderia. There, you can throw the rope down into the cave and pull her up to save her.”

Dash’s eyes widened and his heart leapt with shock and hope. “That...That’s a good idea,” he stammered, his mind whirling with possibilities. “Thank you, Claw. I...I didn’t think of that.”

Claw nodded gravely and slowly turned to gaze out at the woods around her with clouded brown eyes. “Good. Let’s go then.” She paused, then glanced back at the place where Dash had been about to step just moments before and narrowed her eyes. A dark shadow crossed her face. “Oh, and be careful where you walk. The place you were just about to step—look closely at it.”

Dash blinked in bewilderment and frowned, but turned around nonetheless. With a befuddled expression, he leaned down to peer closely at the land where he had just been about to place his paw. With a flash of shock and confusion, he realized that when he looked closely, he could just make out the silver flash of metal beneath a thick covering of dead leaves on the grass just in front of him. “What is...?”

“It’s a hunter trap,” Claw growled, making all the hair on Dash’s back stand on end. Her eyes narrowed with a dark, grave sense of knowing. “They’re scattered all throughout this woods, and if you’re not careful, you could get caught in one.”

Dash tried to hide a shiver and nodded tensely. In the back of his mind, he wondered if Lolista had set the traps out herself as another one of her tests. He wouldn't put it past her. Shaking off his thoughts and trying to hide a shudder of fear, he looked back up at Claw and narrowed his eyes, his heart burning with urgency and desperation. Slowly, his eyes met hers.

With a grave, sympathetic gleam in her shadowed brown irises, Claw took in his mangled appearance and slowly narrowed her eyes. Her voice sounded soft in the silence of the night, but it rang with strength. "Are you ready?"

Dash narrowed his eyes and firmly nodded his head, his heart burning with determination. "Yes, I'm ready. Let's go save Saderia!"

Moonlight shimmered down on the pitch black forest, casting eerie shadows across the grass. Draped in the shadows of the night, Dash stood huddled inside the thick, thorny branches of an enormous clump of brush right on the edge of the woods. Claw stood right beside him, the branches jutting straight through her shimmering, translucent fur. Blessed with the gift of invisibility to anyone but Saderia and her friends, she stood up taller than him to peer out at the land beyond the tall bush. Dark shadows covered both of their faces. With grim, stony expressions, both of them stared out into the small clearing in the woods in front of them, never daring to move or say a word.

A tiny clearing covered in shadows sat right in front of them somewhere in the heart of the dense pitch black woods. A thick canopy of dark leaves hung over the small glade, but a hint of moonlight filtered down through a gap in the very center, lighting up the wild grass in the center of the clearing and leaving the dense trees and bushes on the edges of the glade covered in shadows. Illuminated by the eerie glow of moonlight, Lolista stalked out into the center of the small clearing, her ice blue eyes gleaming with bloodlust and her mouth curled up in a cruel, gruesome smirk. Moonlight shone down on her, turning her creamy yellow fur to silver. Around her neck hung a thick, scratchy rope looped over her shoulders several times. The ends of the frayed rope dragged against the silver grass as she stepped out across the clearing and stopped in the very center beneath the glow of moonlight. Her face shone with triumph.

Dash's eyes narrowed. Feeling a deep blaze of fury in his heart, he glared at his mother, his claws kneading into the ground and his heart pounding with urgency. Pain still burned in his tattered body, but he barely noticed it. It didn't matter to him anymore. Even though he was in no condition to fight, he would like nothing more than to tear Lolista apart. If only he could...

For a long moment, he stared out at the silvery lioness with blazing amber eyes, eyeing the rope around her neck and waiting for just the right moment. Beside him, Claw tensed and glared at the lioness, her eyes shining with equal amounts of worry and anger. For what seemed like ages, she stood rigidly still beside him, watching the lioness with shadowed brown eyes. Finally, she flattened her ears and gritted her teeth, her voice nothing but a tense, eerie whisper. "Now."

Dash didn't hesitate. With a wild, echoing snarl of rage and sheer hatred, he shot out of the bushes and lunged toward his mother. Shock flashed in Lolista's eyes as he soared toward her. Letting out a gasp, she whipped around to face him, but moved too late. With a sharp crash and a growl that echoed through the dark, silent night, Dash slammed into her with all of his might, knocking her right off her paws. Before she could even cry out in surprise, he slammed her down onto the cold grass, his claws digging deep into her shoulders and his eyes burning with hatred. Baring his fangs and practically shaking with fury, he shoved her down to pin her to the ground, but never even got a chance to feel victorious.

With a wild, furious snarl, Lolista bared her fangs, her eyes flashing with rage as realization dawned on her. In a split second before Dash could react, she slammed her paws up into his belly with a hard kick that knocked the breath from his throat. Dash's eyes went wide. Letting out a gasp, he flew away from the snarling lioness, his stomach streaming with blood and his heart pounding with terror.

In a flash, he crashed down on the grass with a hard thud that sent a jolt of pain through his entire body. Urgency pounded in his racing heart. Gasping for breath and fighting to ignore the pain burning in his body, Dash struggled to roll around and leap to his paws, knowing he couldn't afford to waste time. His efforts were in vain. Before he could even try to scrabble to his paws, Lolista lunged at him with a wild, furious snarl that echoed through the woods. In a flash too fast for him to counter, she crashed down

on him with a harsh thud that made his breath catch. Her paws slammed down on his shoulders and her claws dug in deep, sending shock waves of pain through his tattered body and forcing him back onto the ground. In a split second, she had pinned him down.

Fury blazed in her cold blue irises. Gritting her teeth, Lolista leaned toward him to glare down into his eyes, her snarling face mere inches away from his. Her triumphant sneer had been replaced by a dark, enraged scowl. With her claws trembling against his shoulders, she glared down at him with fiery ice blue eyes, her voice nothing but a low, furious snarl. “You escaped.” Hatred flashed on her face and a wild snarl boomed out of her throat. “Where’s the Princess?”

Forcing his eyes open and trying to ignore the pain shivering through his body, Dash glared up at his mother with every bit of fire he could possibly muster up, his paws shaking and his fur bristling against the freezing cold grass. “That’s none of your business,” he whispered, his voice cold despite the trembling of his words.

Lolista snorted and curled her lip in disgust. “You are truly a disgrace, *Dash*. It sickens me how you so easily choose the Princess over your own mother.”

Dash narrowed his eyes. Slowly, he raised his head to look up into his mother’s cold, blazing blue eyes without a hint of pain, his expression as cold and emotionless as he felt. True hatred burned in the pit of his stomach, filling his aching body with a wild sense of rage. As he gazed up into his mother’s glinting blue eyes, all he could think of were the horrors she had put Saderia through. Watching Saderia stumble through the dark passageways, so weak, hurt, tired, and hungry to even speak, had been torture. Watching her suffer the kind of agony she had suffered had been unbearable. Lolista had done that. Lolista had put her through that torture and given him no choice but to watch as Saderia suffered through it. His eyes narrowed and his voice hissed out in a low, cold growl rumbling with hatred. “You tried to kill me,” he whispered. “You tortured me and my best friend for *days* by putting us in that place. You almost destroyed Saderia, my best friend in the whole world. You are a monster. The day I call you my mother will be the day I abandon everything I believe in. You are a truly disgusting animal, *Lolista*.”

Lolista's ice blue eyes glinted dangerously in the silver moonlight. "Have it your way, Dash. I have more than one way to bend you to my will."

Without warning, she suddenly lunged forward to drive her fangs into his throat, but Dash saw it coming. In a flash, he whipped his claws across Lolista's face as fast and as hard as he could. With a gasp, Lolista instantly snapped back and stumbled away from him, her eyes wide and her face streaming with blood. Dash didn't give her time to recover. As fast as he could, he leapt up and grabbed the end of the rope hanging off her shoulder in his fangs. Before she could react, he suddenly rolled to the side in a quick flash of movement, tugging the rope along with him. Lolista's eyes went wide.

Instantly, the rope uncurled around her neck and whipped off her shoulders with a sharp lash, leaving a dark red mark across her skin. Just as Dash rolled around and leapt to his paws with the end of the rope still clutched tightly in his fangs, Lolista stumbled to the side with a yelp, knocked off balance by the sudden whip of the rope. With a harsh crash, she collapsed onto the ground, her eyes squeezed shut and her fangs bared in a low groan.

Dash didn't bother to look back at her. As fast as he could, he tossed the rope over his shoulder and took off running in a flash of speed and strength he didn't know he had. Hardly daring to breathe, he dove into the dense woods surrounding the tiny clearing and made himself run faster. His legs screamed with protest, but he pushed himself to keep moving, ignoring the agonizing pain burning in his legs. In a flash, he shot through a dense clump of undergrowth and blindly took off running into the dark, dense woods. He didn't know where he was going. He didn't care. All that mattered was getting away with the rope and returning to Saderia.

"This way!" With a shrill gasp, Claw flitted out in front of him and shot off into the shadowy forest, nothing more than a blur of shimmering light in the dense woods.

Dash didn't hesitate. Without stopping, he whipped around and raced after the spirit, feeling the rope coiled around his neck slap his chest with every step. Behind him, a loud, furious snarl rang through the air, but Dash didn't stick around. In a wild, frantic burst of speed, he crashed through the forest as fast as he could, stumbling clumsily through thick

clumps of undergrowth and winding desperately around the trees. Behind him, Lolista's enraged hisses boomed out in the air, but only grew farther and farther away. Without stopping, Dash raced deeper into the dark forest, the woods nothing but a blur of pitch black trees and bushes around him. Step by step, he left Lolista far behind him until he could no longer hear her growling voice. Only the tense silence of the forest whispered in his ears.

Determination flashed in his eyes. Without once slowing down, he charged deeper into the woods, crashing wildly through the trees and stumbling blindly after the bright glow of Claw's fur in the darkness. The world seemed to blur and tilt around him with pain and exhaustion, but he didn't care. All he cared about was that he had the rope. Now he just had to save Saderia—while he still had the time and the strength.

Eerie silver light shimmered down through the wide gap in the ceiling, lighting up the craggy stone floor of the cave beneath the ground. With a violent shiver, Saderia huddled in closer to herself, tucking her nose tightly between her paws and trying not to tremble. A cold wind whispered down through the gap in the ceiling and rustled her messy fur, making her blood run icy cold. Shaking and curling tighter around herself, she squeezed her eyes shut and tried to control the wild pounding of her heart.

Huddled up in a ball, she lay in the shadow of the poisoned pile of food, trying desperately to make herself blend in with the bright colors of the fruit in case Lolista returned before Dash did. The shadows surrounding her seemed to leer at her, sending shivers through her fur and making her feel even colder than the darkness around her. With a whimper, she desperately buried her face in her paws, then froze.

Without warning, a bright voice suddenly shouted through the silence around her, cracking with exhaustion but ringing with hope. “Saderia! Saderia, I’m back!”

Saderia’s heart skipped a beat. Hardly daring to hope that she had truly heard Dash’s voice, she snapped her head up to look for the source of the sound and gasped. In a flash, Dash’s head appeared right above her on the very edge of the hole in the ceiling, illuminated by the bright silver glow of moonlight. His amber eyes shone with excitement despite the exhaustion on his face and a wide, hopeful smile crossed his muzzle when he caught sight of Saderia. His voice rang with excitement. “Saderia! I’m here!”

Saderia's eyes widened with disbelief. Hardly daring to breathe, she staggered to her paws and stumbled away from the pile of food, her heart beating faster in her chest. "Dash!" All at once, the pain, cold, and exhaustion haunting her body seemed to fade away. A wild, hopeful smile curled up the corners of her mouth and her eyes lit up with joy. With a bright, gasping laugh of desperation and excitement, she gazed up at him with wide eyes, feeling almost light-headed with relief. "Did you get help?"

"I got Lolista's rope!" Without another word, Dash suddenly slung a long strand of rope over the side of the hole, his eyes glimmering with excitement. Slowly, he lowered the rope farther and farther into the shadowy cave until it dangled down right in front of Saderia's face, almost silver in the moonlight. His voice rang down to her ears, bright with excitement. "Grab on!"

Saderia's eyes widened. Feeling her heart speed up with hope, she desperately reached out and grabbed the rope tightly, almost unable to believe it was real. Barely daring to breathe, she hesitated for only half a second, then instantly wound the rope around her paws several times to secure them. Digging her claws deep into the rope, she held it firmly in her trembling paws, hardly daring to believe it was there—that she finally had a way out. With a shaky gasp, she held the rope tightly and snapped up to look at Dash, her eyes shining with hope and desperation. "I...I think I've got it!" she stammered, digging her claws deep into the rope and not bothering to control the frantic pounding of her heart. "Can you pull me up now?"

Dash nodded hastily, his eyes gleaming in the moonlight. "Of course. Just hang on." In a flash, he leaned down to grab the rope, his head disappearing from sight. A second passed in tense silence that seemed to last forever, then the rope jolted upward.

Saderia's heart leapt in her chest. Feeling her blood race in her veins with the faintest glimmer of hope, she looked up with wide eyes as the rope slowly slid upward. Inch by inch, the trembling rope slipped farther and farther upward, pulled by Dash just out of sight. Somewhere beyond the hole in the ceiling, she heard Dash groan with effort, but the rope never stopped. Bit by bit, he hoisted her up at a slow, gradual pace that seemed to take forever. Carefully, he pulled her farther and farther up until she dangled

a good few feet above the floor of the rocky cave. With every tug on the taut, trembling rope, Saderia moved closer and closer to the surface world.

The gap in the ceiling of the cave seemed to grow wider and wider, as if welcoming her to the upper world again. Past the hole, she could just make out the soft, dewy grass springing up over the land and the trees rising up in the woods just beyond the clearing surrounding the gap. The earthy scents of grass, growing trees, dirt, and life slowly filtered down to her nose, warming her with its fresh, lively scent. The chilly breeze whistling through the dark night air ruffled her fur, but instead of chilling her, it only seemed to make her feel alive. Her heart beat faster and faster. For the first time, she started to hope that she might finally be free. Her entire body went weak with relief as she moved closer and closer to the gap in the ceiling, drawing ever closer to the surface world but always remaining just out of reach. All too soon, though, the fantasy of being free disappeared.

A soft, sneering voice snickered through the silence of the night, making Saderia tense and Dash freeze along with the rope.

“So this is where you’re hiding the Princess.” With a smirk in her icy voice, Lolista let out a soft snicker that chilled Saderia to the bone. When Saderia and Dash froze in shock, the unseen lioness just laughed. In a voice even colder than the frigid night air, she let out a low, mocking growl. “Come on. You didn’t think I’d give up that easily, did you?”

Chapter Twenty-Two

The Winner

Slowly, Lolista stepped out of the pitch black woods surrounding the tiny clearing and stalked closer to Dash, her ice blue eyes gleaming with triumph and her mouth curled up in an evil sneer. Step by step, she stalked across the small, grassy clearing, her eyes never leaving Dash and her silvery tail flicking wildly back and forth through the shadows. Snickering to herself, she licked her lips and grinned, her leering blue eyes boring into Dash's.

"I think I've let this game go on a little too long," she whispered, taking step after step and stalking closer and closer to the gap in the center of the clearing where Dash stood. Her fangs gleamed in the silver light.

Dash's heart skipped with fear. With wide eyes, he took a step back, but didn't let go of the rope dangling down into the cave. His mind spun with panic. Hardly daring to breathe, he stared at Lolista in horror, then sharply snapped down to look at Saderia. His eyes caught on hers and his heart lurched with terror. With eyes wide with fear and dismay, Saderia dangled a few feet above the craggy cave floor and a few feet below the grassy forest ground—too low to pull up but too high to drop without hurting her. Her horror-struck expression swam before his eyes, making his heart beat faster and faster.

A low snarl sounded just in front of him. With a gasp, Dash snapped up to look at Lolista and almost jumped when he saw her take a step closer, barely a few paces away from him. Bloodlust gleamed in her ice blue eyes. Closer and closer she stalked, her blazing blue eyes never leaving his. With every step, her sneer only seemed to grow wider. Dash's heart skipped a beat. Feeling his blood run cold, he took another desperate step back, but even as he did, he knew there was nowhere he could go. His eyes darted back and forth between the lioness stalking toward him and the tiger dangling just below him. His mind whirled with panic and indecision. He knew he had to fight...but what could he do about Saderia?

Desperately, he glanced from side to side without knowing what he was looking for. Just as Lolista took another step toward him, his eyes suddenly caught on a flash of silver hidden beneath a clump of leaves just beside him. Moonlight glinted off the hidden object in a bright flash of metal, making Dash's heart skip. His eyes widened in surprise when he realized what it was. A hunter trap. Without stopping to think about what he was doing, he yanked the trap up in the air with one claw and slammed it down on the rope just as it clamped shut. With a metallic snap, its claws drove into the dirt, pinning the rope to the ground and holding it in place. Dash didn't hesitate. As soon as the trap clamped down on the rope, he let go of it and bared his fangs. With a wild, desperate cry, he lunged toward Lolista as fast as he could.

Saderia's eyes widened. With a yelp of fear, she jerked downward when the rope slipped, then snapped to a stop when the clamp caught the rope and held it in place, leaving her suspended in midair. Her heart skipped a beat. Hardly daring to breathe, she clung to the scratchy rope with all of her might and looked up through the hole at the surface world above in horror, her mind spinning and her blood running cold. There was nothing she could do to pull herself up to help. All she could do was watch as the fight raged above her, unable to do a thing.

Dash's furious snarl rang through the air. In a flash, he soared toward Lolista with a deafening shout, his fangs bared and his gleaming claws outstretched. Rage flashed in his narrowed amber eyes. In a wild streak of dark brown fur, he shot toward Lolista, but couldn't move fast enough. At once, Lolista froze and snapped up to look at him with flashing blue eyes, her sneer twisting into a dark scowl of rage. Letting out a low growl, she lunged to the side a second before Dash crashed into her, sending him tumbling down to the cold, hard ground.

Pain burned through Dash's body the instant he hit the ground. With a low groan, he rolled onto his side as fast as he could, gritting his teeth against the stinging pain. Unsteadily, he stumbled to his paws, his muscles burning and his heart pounding with terror. Gasping for breath, he whipped around to face Lolista, but wasn't swift enough. In a flash, Lolista whipped around right in front of him, her silvery yellow fur bristling with rage. Bloodlust gleamed in her eyes. With a ringing snarl, she whipped her paws

out and smacked him across the face with a blow that knocked the breath out of his throat.

Dash's eyes widened and his mouth gaped open in a gasp. Knocked off balance, he stumbled helplessly to the side, his face streaming with blood and his muzzle stinging with pain. Desperately, he tried to catch his fall, but couldn't. Before he could even attempt to steady himself, Lolista raked her claws across his scarred legs, tearing them out from under him and sending him tumbling to the ground with a wild, terrified yowl of pain.

Lolista didn't waste a second. Baring her fangs in a bloodthirsty snarl, she lunged toward Dash the minute he smacked down on the ground and rolled onto his side. Before Dash could even try to move, her paws slammed down onto his shoulders so hard it made his heart skip. In a flash, she shoved him down into the dirt and smacked his head against the earth. While his eyes squeezed shut in pain, her claws tore deep into his shoulders, spilling blood out across his fur and onto the silvery grass. Dash's heart lurched. Feeling his breath catch with pain and terror, he forced his eyes open and found himself staring up into two cold blue eyes glowing with hatred and bloodlust. Slowly, Lolista curled her mouth up in a wide sneer and let out an icy snicker. In a flash, she lunged for his throat.

Dash's heart skipped. Without thinking, he kicked up wildly with his back paws to push her away, his pain dissolving in a wild burst of strength. Before Lolista's fangs could close around his throat, she jerked back with a shrill cry of surprise. Unbalanced, she stumbled away from him with a furious growl, her belly wet with blood. Dash didn't waste a second. The instant she staggered away from him, he rolled around and scrabbled frantically to his paws, his heart pounding and his mind whirling with terror. Gasping for breath, he leapt to his paws and whipped around to face her just as she caught herself a few steps away. Their eyes locked, burning with equal amounts of hatred and determination.

Dash's mind whirled as he faced her. With as much strength as he could muster up, he bunched his muscles and tensed to prepare himself for another attack. Even as he waited for the silvery lioness to make a move, though, he knew his sapped strength would not be enough to beat her. He had spent days wandering through dark tunnels without food or rest after falling and hurting himself horribly in that rocky hollow. Lolista had spent the past few days perfectly comfortable, planning her revenge. He didn't

have a chance. There was no way he could win. But this time, there was no way he could just run away. If he left, Lolista would easily be able to get to Saderia and kill her without a second thought. Dash's heart beat faster with horror and his eyes grew wide with dismay. There was nothing he could do. If he stayed to fend off Lolista, he would end up dead after a few choice swipes. After he was dead, Lolista would just go after Saderia. But if he left now, Saderia would still die.

His heart skipped a beat. With a cold, sinking sense of horror, he realized how eerily familiar his situation was. The position he had been in atop Rock's monstrous den when his only choices had been to push Saderia to her death or die along with her swirled through his mind. It seemed things had come full circle. Now he was right back where he had started with the same impossible choice to make. His heart pounded faster, but his eyes narrowed with a dark sense of determination and resolve. He would not make the wrong choice again. He would fight as long as he could—if for nothing else than to weaken Lolista enough to give Saderia a chance. His heart beat wildly in his chest, but he ignored it. If he had to die to give Saderia a chance, so be it.

As he forced himself to glare back at Lolista without flinching and face his fate, he didn't realize that Claw had chosen that moment to disappear without a trace.

“*Claw?*” With a wild, stunned gasp, Dingo leapt backward in shock, his eyes growing wide and his heart skipping a beat. Before him, the light, shimmering outline of his sister slowly appeared in the darkness of the shadowy forest just in front of the copse of trees he had been searching moments before. In seconds, her wispy form materialized, shining brighter than the moon and piercing through the shadows. Dingo’s eyes grew wide. Hardly daring to breathe, he stared up at his sister in shock, barely believing what he was seeing. “*Claw...*”

Claw stared firmly back into his eyes, her light brown irises oddly shadowed and her fur bristling with a wild sense of fear and urgency. “*Dingo.*” Narrowing her eyes, she faced him with a grave frown, her expression seeming to glow with panic. “Saderia and Dash are in big trouble. You’ve got to help them.”

Dingo blinked in shock, then instantly narrowed his eyes, pushing back his surprise. With a darker, more serious frown, he looked up at her intently, his fur beginning to bristle and his heart beating faster with tension. He didn't hesitate or stop to ask questions. Claw's dark expression made it clear he needed to act now. "Where are they?" he demanded. "Can you lead me to them?"

"Yes." With the faintest glimmer of hope in her eyes, Claw nodded her head and tensely flicked her tail. "Are you ready?"

"Yes. Lead the way!" In a flash, Dingo snapped his head back to look at the shadowy woods around him, his heart pounding and his face darkening with determination. "Jeb!" he shouted in a voice that rang through the shadowy night air. "Get over here! Hurry!"

In a flash, Jeb shot out from a thick clump of undergrowth behind him and looked up with hopeful blue and green eyes, then froze. Instantly, he skidded to a halt right behind Dingo, his eyes widening and his fur bristling with shock. "C-Claw?" he stammered, staring up at the ghostly dingo with eyes wide with disbelief.

"There's no time for explanations." With a low, fierce growl, Dingo glared at Jeb and tensely lashed his tail. "Saderia and Dash are in trouble, and Claw can lead us to them. Now hurry! We've got to get to them before it's too late!"

Without another word, Dingo whipped around and shot off into the dark woods, flicking his tail to signal for Jeb to follow and Claw to lead the way. In a flash, Claw whisked out in front of him and flew out into the forest ahead of him, shining bright, otherworldly light through the darkness and guiding the way through the shadowy woods. Determination glittered in her light brown eyes as she tore through the forest with Dingo and Jeb close behind her. Dingo didn't waste any time. Ignoring the weeds and grasses tangling around his paws, he flew through the dense woods as fast as he could, weaving around wide trees and charging straight through thorny bushes with a wild rustling sound and a quick shower of leaves. He barely noticed when roots tried to trip his paws or when branches scratched across his sides. His eyes focused on Claw and nothing else, and he forced himself to keep running, willing himself to move faster. Behind him, Jeb struggled to keep up, never daring to slow down.

“Makero! Karenisha! Cia! Jash!” Raising his voice to a bellowing shout, Dingo gazed out at the dark woods around him as he raced through the trees without slowing down, his eyes gleaming with determination. “I know where Saderia and Dash are! Get over here! Fast!”

The instant the words left his mouth, the four tigers burst out from behind a copse of trees and undergrowth in a crowd, their eyes wide with shock and hope. With wide eyes and bristling fur, Makero looked up at him from the front of the crowd as he staggered after him, his expression stunned as if he hardly dared to believe what he had heard. “You know where Saderia and Dash are?” he choked out, his voice betraying his shock and hope.

Dingo just nodded and turned to look ahead. Realizing that none of the four tigers could see Claw, he narrowed his eyes and made himself run forward to take the lead, his heart pounding with strength and urgency. “Yes, I know! Follow me! I’ll lead you to them! We have to hurry, though!” Baring his fangs, he let out a low growl and tensely lashed his tail, forcing himself to run faster. “I...have a feeling they’re in danger! We need to find them! We need to help them! Now!”

A strangled yowl of pain tore out of Dash’s throat. With a deafening growl of fury that rang in his ears, Lolista slammed his back up against the ground, snapping his head back with a sharp crack that sent waves of pain shooting through his body. Dash’s eyes squeezed shut in agony, then flew open with a wild flash of panic and fear. Lolista towered over him, her ice blue eyes a blaze of fury and hatred and her silvery legs practically shaking with rage. Baring her fangs in a gruesome snarl, she slammed him back against the dirt, making his entire body scream with pain.

Dash’s heart lurched. With a wild shriek, he lashed out desperately with his claws in the vain hope of pushing her away. In a flash, his claws caught the edge of Lolista’s nose. At once, the lioness jerked back with a wince and a muted cry of pain, but didn’t stumble away. Before Dash could even try to throw her off, she slammed her paws back against his shoulders harder, pinning him to the ground. Blood streaked down her face and her eyes glowed with an even deeper hatred and a reckless sense of rage. Through the blood dripping down her face, her ice blue eyes glinted with hatred, fire on ice.

Before Dash could even try to push her off, she slammed her claws down on his bloody paws and shoved them down into the dirt. Her long, bloody claws drove deep into his paws, tearing a strangled scream of pain from his throat. Lolista's eyes blazed with hatred and her claws only dug in deeper, pinning him helplessly to the ground. Dash's heart lurched with pain. Ignoring the blood spilling out of his burning paws and staining the silver grass beneath him, he gritted his teeth and twisted desperately beneath Lolista, struggling to wriggle away. No matter what he did, though, he couldn't break free of her grasp. Every movement only made her claws sink in deeper.

A wide, crazed sneer curled up the corners of Lolista's blood-smeared mouth and her eyes blazed with an evil light. Snickering to herself with a wild, breathless laugh, she yanked Dash's paws up over his head and pinned them both against the ground with one paw. Before he could protest, she suddenly pulled her other paw away and held it up high, her claws glinting in the bright silver moonlight. With a sharp, bloodthirsty hiss, she drove her claws deep into his scarred stomach and dragged them down his belly, leaving dark, bloody lines through his fur.

Dash's eyes widened in shock. Pain blazed through him like fire, setting every inch of him ablaze with agony. With a wild, strangled yowl that rang through the air, he thrashed desperately beneath the lioness to break free, but couldn't escape her grasp. Slowly, her claws drove deeper into his skin, setting his blood alight with pain. Squeezing his eyes shut, he struggled to break free, but couldn't move. He was just too weak to free himself, and every second, his strength only seemed to fade away more and more. Lolista's claws only dug deeper into his paws and stomach with every move he made. His loud, agonized cries boomed through the cold night air.

Saderia's eyes grew wide. Shivering in horror, she clung helplessly to the long rope, dangling uselessly several feet below the surface of the forest and several feet above the bottom of the cave. Dash's strangled screams rang in her ears over and over again, bouncing around the walls of the cave until they echoed inside her own mind. Violent shivers raced through her fur, making her tremble in the frigid air. Every part of her burned with the pain she knew Dash must be feeling.

Squeezing her eyes shut to try to block out the screams of her best friend, she desperately shook her head, her voice ringing with pain and

agony. “Stop!” Gasping for breath and feeling her entire body tremble with anguish, she wildly shook her head and gritted her teeth. Desperate tears streaked down her face. “Please!” she begged. “Stop! Please stop!” Her body twisted wildly through the air and her heart thumped with pain as Dash’s screams rang out around her.

“Please!” Frantically shaking her head, she squeezed her eyes shut with a raw, deafening scream. “*Don’t hurt him!*”

Hardly daring to breathe, she forced herself to open her eyes and looked up through the gap above her at the fight raging over her head, terrified of what she might see. When she caught sight of Dash and Lolista just a few paces away from the hole in the ground above her, her heart skipped a beat.

With a cruel, twisted smirk, Lolista leaned down over Dash’s agonized face, her ice blue eyes glinting in the moonlight. Slowly, she raised her bloody claws from Dash’s scarred belly and pressed them up against the dark lion’s throat.

Saderia’s heart skipped. Her entire body froze and her paws tensed on the scratchy rope. Time itself seemed to stop. Dash’s eyes flew open, but he never got a chance to fight back. Saderia’s mouth gaped open in a wild, desperate scream. “*No!*”

“*Get off of him!*”

The instant Saderia’s scream rang out from the cave, a wild howl of fury split the air. In a flash, a streak of shaggy brown fur shot out from the dark bushes just beside the two lions and flew toward Lolista. With a brutal smack, the animal slammed into her before she could slice Dash’s throat, sending her stumbling backward with a sharp yelp. In a blur of brown and creamy yellow fur, the two stumbled across the grass, away from Dash.

Dash’s eyes flew open in shock. While Saderia gaped up at the surface world in disbelief and struggled to get a closer look without losing her grip on the rope, Dash took in a wild, shaky breath. Shock shone on his face. Hardly daring to breathe, he stared straight up, seeing nothing but black sky and glittering stars above him. Through the haze of pain screaming in his fresh, bleeding wounds, he realized Lolista was gone. Someone had saved him.

Without warning, a chorus of harsh, deafening snarls boomed out beside him, making his heart skip a beat. Dash’s eyes went wide. Feeling

his breath catch in his throat, he let out a shaky gasp and frantically stumbled to his paws, his bloody legs trembling with shock and pain. His heart beat faster and faster as he struggled to pull himself up. When he finally managed to stumble to his paws and whip around to see who had helped him, his heart stopped entirely. His eyes grew even wider. Feeling every inch of him freeze in shock, he gaped at the animal who had saved him and let out a shaky gasp.

“Dingo?”

The bristling desert dog stood just a few steps away with his back turned to him, his ears flattened and his fangs bared in a snarl. A few light cuts sliced through the fur along his shoulders and face, dripping with blood. Across from him, Lolista desperately stumbled to her paws from where she had crashed down on the silvery grass, her eyes wide and her expression bright with shock and confusion. While the lioness struggled to pick herself up, the shaggy desert canine glared her down, his light brown eyes gleaming with fury.

At the sound of his name, Dingo looked up out of the corner of his eye and glanced back at Dash. Their eyes locked. In a split second, a billion unspoken words seemed to pass between them. Just as soon as Dingo looked back at Dash, he narrowed his eyes and turned away, his light brown irises gleaming with determination. Flattening his ears, the desert dog whipped around to face Lolista just as she let out a deafening snarl and bunched her muscles to spring at him, her eyes blazing with fury. With bared fangs and outstretched claws, she sailed toward Dingo, her snarl ringing with rage.

Dingo didn’t hesitate. In a quick flash of speed, he lunged to the side a second before she slammed into him, narrowly missing her attack. Her claws caught his ear as she soared past, but Dingo barely noticed. Baring his fangs in a snarl, he whipped around just as Lolista flew past him. With a wild shriek of shock and frustration, Lolista crashed down hard onto the ground behind him, but didn’t fall. On unsteady paws, she stumbled across the silvery grass away from him, her fur bristling and her tail lashing. Without stopping to catch her balance, she whipped around to face him in a flash, her eyes blazing with anger. Letting out a wild snarl, she bunched her muscles and leapt toward him as fast as she could.

Dingo gritted his teeth. The instant she lunged into the air, he bared his fangs and leapt at her at the same time, his eyes blazing with fury. With a brutal crack, the two slammed into each other in midair, their claws flailing out to dig into each other's shoulders and their fangs snapping at anything they could get to. With a wild chorus of snarls and painful yelps, the two crashed down onto the frigid ground without letting go of each other. Burying their claws in each other's shoulders, Dingo and Lolista tumbled across the grass in a deadly embrace, biting and snapping at each other with every turn. Blood streaked their fur and pain flashed in their eyes, but they never stopped. Rolling over and over across the grass, they each struggled to get the upper hand. Their furious snarls rang through the tense night air.

Dash's eyes widened in shock. Hardly daring to breathe, he stared at the snarling animals in awe and disbelief, barely believing what was right in front of his eyes. For a tense heartbeat of silence, he stared at the battling animals in shock, then almost jumped when realization washed over him. This was his chance to save Saderia!

Feeling his heart skip with shock and hope, he instantly tore his eyes off the two snarling animals and whipped around to look back at the huge hole in the ground. Urgency washed over him, chasing away the pain burning in his shaking body. With a soft gasp, he lurched back toward the rope that remained clamped down tightly on the ground. As fast as he could, he grabbed the rope and yanked hard on it, determined to pull Saderia up while he had the chance.

Saderia's eyes opened wide with surprise when the rope suddenly jerked upward, pulling her along with it. With a gasp, she looked up in shock and felt her heart leap with relief when Dash's bloody face appeared over the edge of the hole. Her blood surged with hope, but at the same time, her fur shivered wildly with fear. As Dash gritted his teeth and yanked hard on the rope to pull her up, she winced and nervously flicked her tail. "Dash! Don't hurt yourself. Please..."

Dash's eyes flicked down and locked on hers. Determination burned in their dark amber depths when he saw the fear and worry on her face. Gritting his teeth, he flattened his ears and gazed down into her eyes with a tense, unwavering expression, refusing to give in to his pain. "Don't worry," he growled. "I...I've got you." With all of his strength, he took the

rope and tugged as hard as he could, pulling her up inch by inch as fast as he possibly could.

Slowly, Saderia was lifted up higher and higher. Feeling her heart beat faster in her chest, she gazed up at the gap in the ceiling above the horrible rocky prison, hardly daring to believe she might finally be free. Tug after tug, Dash pulled her closer and closer to the surface world. After what seemed like ages, she finally dared to reach out a paw and grab hold of the side of the gap when she moved close enough. Hope skipped in her chest. With Dash tugging hard on the rope, she finally managed to pull herself up out of the hole into the surface world.

Her eyes widened in shock. With a shaky gasp, she stumbled out onto the cold, silvery grass, her heart pounding wildly and her legs trembling with relief. At once, Dash dropped the rope and let it slip back into the cave, his eyes wide with relief. In a flash, he shot toward her and pressed up against her, his eyes shining with equal amounts of joy and concern. Saderia's heart glowed with hope. Leaning against Dash, she struggled to control the wild beating of her heart and took in several deep gasps of fresh night air. Her mind whirled with amazement as she gazed out at the shadowy forest clearing all around her. She had made it. She was finally...*finally* free.

A wild barrage of harsh, brutal snarls suddenly burst out beside them. With a gasp, Saderia whipped around with Dash close beside her and snapped her head back to look at Dingo. Fear shot through her like an electric current at the sounds of fighting and she started to lurch toward the source of the sounds to help, then froze when her eyes finally found the bristling desert dog.

Baring his fangs in a deafening snarl, Dingo rolled to a stop on his back in the dewy grass just a few paces away from them. With all of his might, he suddenly kicked up hard with his back paws, knocking the breath from Lolista before she could let out another snarl. Letting out a strangled yelp of shock and pain, Lolista staggered away from him and clumsily collapsed, unable to regain her balance. Covered in deep, bloody wounds, the lioness crumpled to the ground with a shaky gasp, her fur bristling and her eyes wide with shock. In front of her, Dingo instantly rolled around and leapt to his paws, his eyes flashing with fury and his fangs bared in a rumbling snarl. Ignoring the blood dripping from the deep gashes the

lioness had scored across his chest, face, and shoulders, he slowly prowled backward to stand protectively between her and Saderia and Dash, panting heavily but never tearing his eyes off the bloody lioness.

Rage flashed in Lolista's ice blue eyes. Gritting her teeth, she forced herself to her paws and shook herself once, ignoring the blood trickling through her creamy yellow fur. Her fur bristled wildly with fury and her tail lashed sharply back and forth. Gritting her teeth, she let out a low, dangerous growl and started to stalk toward Dingo on legs shaking with rage. Before she could take a single step, though, she froze. Shock flitted across her bloody face.

An earsplitting chorus of furious roars and enraged snarls suddenly erupted from the pitch black forest just a few steps to the left of Dingo and Lolista. Just as the stunned lioness whipped around to face the source of the sound, Karenisha and Makero burst out from the shadowy undergrowth and skidded to an abrupt halt right on the edge of the wide, moonlit clearing. At once, they snapped around to face Lolista, their fur bristling and their fangs bared in low, deadly snarls. Shock flashed across their faces when they caught sight of the stunned lioness, but it faded away into anger when they recognized her. Rage flashed in their narrowed amber and green eyes and they bared their fangs, their growls growing darker and louder with fury.

In a flash, Cia and Uncle Jash raced out with Jeb close beside them and skidded to a halt right behind the King and Queen. With eyes wide with surprise, the tigers and kraguer gazed out at the clearing in shock, then slowly narrowed their eyes, tensing for a fight. In front of them, Karenisha and Makero unsheathed their claws, their tails lashing and their fur bristling with rage.

“Lolista!”

At the sound of Karenisha's stunned, enraged voice, Lolista looked up at her with wide, horrified ice blue eyes. Blinking several times, she stumbled back a pace and slowly shook her head, as if in denial of what she was seeing. Hardly daring to breathe, the lioness staggered away from them without taking her eyes off them, her rage disappearing in a wave of shock and fear. All the fur along her bloodied back rose up in shock and her ears flattened back in disbelief. Catching Karenisha's eye, she tried to curl her lip in a glare or a sneer, but only looked frightened instead. All the color seemed to drain out of her face at once.

Slowly, Karenisha stalked toward the stunned lioness with a low, vicious snarl. Fire blazed in her narrowed amber eyes, burning with hate, determination, and rage. Her muscles rippled beneath her bristling fur, while her claws drove deep into the dirt, practically shaking with anger and strength. Her sharp teeth gleamed in the bright silver light of the moon. Baring her fangs, she let out a dangerous snarl that boomed out all around the clearing. “You...” Gritting her teeth and lashing her tail furiously back and forth, she glared at Lolista with flaming amber eyes that could have scorched her all on their own. “Stay away from my daughter. Or **die!**”

Before Lolista could say a word, the Queen took a step closer to her and glared into her wide blue eyes, her voice trembling with hatred. “If you *ever* lay a paw on my daughter again, I will destroy you! Now run away from here! And never, ever come after my daughter *again!*”

Lolista staggered back as Karenisha’s ferocious roar echoed out around the clearing. For a split second, she stared up at the tiger in shock, as if struggling with the desire to run and the longing to stand up to her. Without a word, she stared up at Karenisha and slowly narrowed her eyes. Gritting her teeth, she glared back at the Queen, but her gaze wavered with unease. Her eyes flicked to the snarling tigers standing firmly behind Karenisha and her gaze darkened with fear. For a tense moment of silence, she glared up at the Queen without a word, then bared her fangs and grudgingly lashed her tail, hiding her fear with a low growl of rage. “You win for now, but I will have my revenge! On all of you!”

Without another word, the lioness whipped around and shot off across the grass in a wild blur of creamy yellow fur too fast to see. Karenisha instantly took a step after her, but didn’t move fast enough. In a flash, Lolista raced across the clearing and dove into the thick, shadowy bushes on the edge of the woods. Leaves flew up around her and the undergrowth rustled once, then fell silent. Quiet fell over the bloody clearing. In a single instant, Lolista vanished into the dark woods and disappeared from sight. Within seconds, she was gone.

Karenisha narrowed her eyes. Gritting her teeth, she glared at the place where Lolista had disappeared for a long moment, her claws kneading deep into the dirt and her tail lashing tensely through the air. Silence fell over the tense clearing. Everyone seemed to stop at once. Time itself seemed to slow to a crawl, making the moment seem to last for ages. For

several tense heartbeats, Karenisha glared at the place where Lolista had disappeared, her eyes shadowed with anger. Behind her, Makero, Cia, and Uncle Jash stared after the fleeing lioness in surprise, their eyes stunned but grave. With wide eyes, Jeb followed their gazes, his expression stunned and bewildered.

A few paces away from them, Dingo glared after the lioness with narrowed eyes, his fur still bristling and his muscles still tensed for a fight. Soft, weary breaths heaved out of his throat, but he remained firmly in place and never backed down, still ready to protect his friends. Behind him, Dash stared after his mother with dark, tense eyes, his face relieved but shadowed. Pain still haunted his dark expression, but he barely seemed to notice it. Panting heavily and struggling to catch his breath, he stared at the dark woods where the lioness had disappeared. Slowly, his breathing began to return to normal.

Beside him, Saderia hardly dared to move. After staring out at the dark, empty woods for what felt like years, she let out a silent, shaky sigh, feeling her entire body go numb with relief. Slowly, her shoulders relaxed and the fight died from her body. Her heartbeat gradually returned to normal as the pain in her aching, bloody limbs faded away into the background. With wide eyes, she stared at the place where Lolista had disappeared, her breath shallow and stunned. Realization dawned in the back of her mind, making her heart skip and her breath catch in her throat. Relief welled up in her chest like a wave, stinging her eyes with hopeful tears. It was over. Finally...it was over.

For a long moment of silence, Karenisha stared after the cruel lioness, then slowly tore her eyes off the shadowy woods. With a shaky breath, she blinked several times to reorient herself with reality, then turned around to look over her shoulder. Her eyes instantly snapped to Saderia. All at once, every bit of rage and fury died from her expression. Her shoulders slumped with relief and her fur lay flat against her back. Her eyes lit up with joy and her breath caught in her throat.

“Saderia!” With a strained whisper tinged with such relief that Saderia herself could feel it, Karenisha stumbled forward to race toward her daughter. In a flash, she bounded past Dingo and skidded to a halt right in front of Saderia, her eyes brimming with joyous tears. Practically knocking her off her paws, the Queen buried her face in the bloody fur on Saderia’s

head and nuzzled her warmly, letting her eyes slip shut with relief. “Saderia...”

Saderia’s heart glowed with relief. Squeezing her eyes shut, she buried her face in her mother’s chest, feeling a tear of hope and joy streak down her face. Taking a shaky breath and feeling her heartbeat slowly begin to calm, she let out a trembling gasp, barely hearing the shakiness of her words. “Mom...” she whispered. “You really are back...”

Karenisha just smiled and nuzzled her daughter, her face bright with relief.

Taking a deep breath, Saderia pressed close to her mother for a long moment, then slowly pulled back. Feeling her heart lift with joy and her pain fade away, she glanced back over her shoulder at the dark lion standing right behind her. Her eyes instantly snapped to her best friend and her heart beat faster with gratitude. Meeting his eyes, she took in the deep scars all over his body, the blood soaking his fur, and the relief on his face, and felt her breath catch with amazement. With wide eyes, she stared back at him in awe, never looking away. “And you too,” she whispered, her trembling voice almost too soft to hear in the dark, silent clearing. Slowly, she shook her head, her eyes stinging with grateful tears. “Thank you, Dash. Thank you so much. You...You saved my life.”

Dash’s eyes widened in surprise as her words sank in. Blinking several times, he stared at her in amazement, then slowly let out a soft, trembling sigh. With a faint, pained smile, he clumsily stumbled to his paws and took a step closer to her, his eyes shining with warmth and relief. His heart beat faster with hope as he stared into Saderia’s glowing amber eyes. For the first time, he realized she was right. He truly had saved her life. He had finally done something right. He had actually saved Saderia like a true friend—like the animal he used to be. A wide smile lit up his face, chasing away the last remnants of pain and exhaustion. Feeling lighter than he had in weeks, he gazed up into her shining eyes and dipped his head, his smile lighting up his entire face.

“I’m glad you’re safe,” he whispered. “I...I would have died to save you.”

Saderia just smiled and let out a soft, relieved sigh, her body feeling light and weak with happiness. “I know,” she whispered, her voice betraying her gratitude. “I would do the same thing for you. I’m sorry I ever

doubted you.” Shaking her head, she met his gaze with eyes shining with tears and gratitude, unable to wipe the smile off her face. “We will always be friends, Dash, and we will never be torn apart.”

Dash beamed up at her and nodded, his eyes bright with hope and joy. “Never again.”

The next few hours passed by in a blur. After practically dragging Saderia and Dash back home, Dingo, Jeb, and Saderia’s family tucked them tightly into the comfortable blue bed in Saderia’s darkened room, letting them rest side by side. As soon as they were tucked into the warm bed, Karenisha sent Cia and Uncle Jash to the Home of the Leopards to fetch Maeta and bring her back to the house to attend to Saderia and Dash’s injuries. While Saderia’s aunt and uncle rushed to find the leopard leader, Karenisha, Makero, Dingo, and Jeb stayed with Saderia and Dash, keeping a close eye on them and worriedly checking on their gruesome wounds. In time, Cia and Uncle Jash returned with Maeta, looking just as worried and afraid as the others.

At once, Maeta rushed to their bedside, seeming horrified by their grisly injuries. At Dash’s insistence, she treated Saderia’s gravest wounds first before moving on to his, then alternated between treating both of their minor wounds as quickly as she could. After several hours of having their wounds treated with herbs and medicines that made their injuries burn, they finally began to feel a little better. All of their wounds were cleaned, treated, and wrapped up to heal, while the blood was completely cleaned from their fur. Though Saderia and Dash both knew they faced a long and difficult recovery, Maeta assured them that their wounds would heal in time without difficulties. At Karenisha’s request, she promised to return every day to check on them to see how they were doing and make sure their wounds were healing the way they should.

Soon after, Maeta left to let them rest and recover, leaving Saderia and Dash alone with their family and friends. Even though their bodies ached with pain and exhaustion, neither of them wanted to sleep—especially when their family and friends had so many questions. They never voiced them, but it was clear they had them. Ignoring their exhaustion, Saderia and Dash decided to explain everything to their family once and for

all before they slept. The next few hours were spent fighting exhaustion and telling long, twisting stories.

After coming to an unspoken agreement, Saderia and Dash began their story at the closest thing to a beginning they could find. Together, they both started to describe how Dastarius had visited Dash before the war with Rock and later interfered in the battles. Leaving out no details, they explained everything Dastarius had done and how it had later affected them and strained their friendship once the war had ended. Everyone but Karenisha, Dingo, and Jeb was stunned, at first, but as Saderia and Dash explained every detail, they slowly began to understand the war more and more. Eventually, Saderia's family managed to recover from their shock, though Saderia could still detect a hint of unease in their eyes when she looked up at them. She pushed off her own worries and continued the story, knowing they would all recover in time.

As the moon shimmered in the black night sky outside, she and Dash started to tell them everything that had happened in the past few weeks after the end of the war. Eventually, they described the strange valley they had found while looking for Tawny and Bunny and how they had decided to make it into their very own club. Saderia even told them how she and her friends had originally called it Club Paradise—although Club *Trouble* seemed to fit it more now. With Dash's help, she told her family about all the things they had discovered there...then reluctantly moved on to the grimmer task of describing how they had been captured by Lolista.

Reluctantly, she described how Lolista had tricked her into following her through the woods and lured her to the edge of the waterfall where she had pushed her off into the valley below. As she described the dark memory, her parents' eyes grew wide with shock and their expressions dark with horror. When she moved on to describe how Lolista had taunted them and thrown them into the eerie stone hollow, the same sense of shock and dismay flashed across their faces. When she described the horrors they had faced in the dark tunnels of the rocky hollow, they found it hard to hide their true horror. While Makero winced and flattened his ears in dismay, Karenisha's fur bristled with horror and disgust and her eyes narrowed in fury. By the time Saderia finished telling the story of the torture Lolista had put them through, her parents, her aunt and uncle, and her friends looked thoroughly horrified.

Afterward, Dash described how Claw had appeared to him and guided him to Lolista to steal her rope and then led him back to Saderia to save her. Jumping into the story, Dingo explained how he too had seen Claw and how she had led him to Saderia and Dash. Although Saderia's family members slowly managed to wrap their minds around the thought and believe it, it was clear they were still stunned. Saderia barely even noticed their shock. She was just glad that Claw had finally come through for them...though she did wonder why the spirit had waited so long to help them. According to Dash, Claw had said she hadn't known about their situation until the last minute, but that only made her wonder more. What had the spirit been doing that had kept her so occupied? After all, Claw herself had told her that she would always be watching her and had proved to be true to her word many times. Saderia didn't resent the fact that the spirit had other things to do that left her unable to help her, but it did make her wonder just what was going on. Had Claw discovered something...bad?

Shaking the thoughts from her mind, Saderia finished describing the last few details of the story, making sure she left nothing out. When she eventually grew too tired to continue, her family left her and Dash alone with their friends after saying one last goodnight and creeping out, leaving the door open a crack.

Illuminated by the bright moonlight shimmering through the window into Saderia's darkened bedroom, she and Dash lay side by side on her warm blue bed, tucked beneath the blanket. Bandages covered her legs, sides, and face, and her body still burned with pain, but she barely noticed any of it. Beside Dash in the warmth of her own house, she barely even felt the sting of her bandaged wounds. Feeling safer than she had in a long time, she rested her head on the pillow next to Dash, her eyelids beginning to slip shut. Beside her, Dash rested his tail lightly on her back, his eyes tired but warm.

In front of their bed, Dingo rose to his paws with Jeb close beside him. Relief and happiness shone in the canine's warm brown eyes and his tail flicked lightly back and forth. Taking a step closer to the edge of the bed, he looked up at Saderia and Dash and smiled a warm, kind smile. "Well, I guess it's time to say goodbye," he murmured. "You two need some sleep, and I've got to get back to the pack."

Jeb let out a soft sigh and reluctantly flicked his tail, his eyes still wide with worry but warm with relief. “I need to get going, too, guys. I should probably get back home before my parents get upset again. You guys do need your sleep, anyway.”

Saderia managed a weak smile and sleepily nodded her head. “All right. Goodbye, Dingo. Goodbye, Jeb. Thank you for everything you’ve done to help us.”

“Yeah, thanks.” Dash paused and looked up at his two friends, then let out a weary sigh, his eyes clouding with regret. With an awkward shrug of his shoulders, he looked up to meet Dingo’s eyes and hesitated, then managed a sad, grateful smile. “Thank you for...saving me, Dingo. And for everything. I’m sorry I was so mean to you before.”

Dingo just waved away his worries with a flick of his tail. “Water under the bridge. I’m just glad you two are safe.” With one last smile, he dipped his head to them and took a step back, his eyes glimmering with warmth. “Sleep well, guys.” When Saderia and Dash nodded and waved goodbye, he smiled up at them, then slowly turned around. Leading Jeb away with a flick of his tail, the canine stepped toward the door on quiet paws. Silently, he slipped through the crack in the doorway and vanished into the shadows of the hallway with Jeb close behind him. Slowly, the door slipped shut behind them with a soft creak and a thud. Paw steps sounded down the hallway, then faded away a second later. In minutes, Dingo and Jeb were gone, leaving Saderia and Dash alone together.

A warm smile flickered across Saderia’s face and her eyes glowed in the peaceful darkness of her room. Letting out a quiet sigh, she turned to look up at Dash and flicked him gently with her tail. “Friends forever?”

Dash nodded and smiled a warm, bright smile. “Friends forever.”

Saderia smiled back. With a warm grin on her face, she let out a soft sigh and rested her head on the dark pillow, feeling a wave of exhaustion crash over her. Dash settled down close beside her with a soft, tired breath of his own, his eyes slipping shut. Side by side, they both drifted off into sleep together before they even noticed their eyelids were drooping. As time passed by, no nightmares or Dreams disturbed either of them. For the first time in what felt like ages, Saderia was finally able to get a good night’s sleep next to her best friend. As moonlight shimmered through the

window into her darkened room, she smiled in her sleep, feeling peaceful and strong again for the first time in a very long time.

Even in her sleep, she knew that she was finally free from the fear that had haunted her since the war. Finally, she was safe in her own home. In her own mind.

Finally, she was herself again.

A dark, shadowy spirit slowly crept through a murky, barren stretch of sandy land, his black-tipped tail flicking tensely back and forth. Pitch black darkness hung over the ghostly dunes, making the ethereal world around him look even bleaker than usual. Barren nothingness spread out around him as far as the eye could see, making this part of the spirit realm seem even emptier than normal. Heavy silence hung over the dark dunes, so thick the shadowy ghost felt he could disappear in it. A dark, calculating gleam flashed in the dark spirit's glowing amber eyes. Silently, he wandered through the shadowy land, searching for one spirit and one spirit alone.

Without a sound, he trailed over the top of a large, dark dune and paused when he gazed down at the shadowy land below. A large, stony den made out of a pile of long, dark rocks stacked one on top of the other suddenly rose up out of the sand dunes, as if from out of nowhere. Darkness seemed to hang over the cave like a thick blanket, leaving the gaping hole in the middle of the rocky den draped in shadows. With dark, tense eyes, the spirit slowly crept closer to the dark den and paused only when he stood framed in the blackness just in front of the shadowy entrance to the den. His ears pricked up.

Inside the shadowy den, low growls whispered through the silence, barely audible in the overpowering quiet haunting the land of the dead. Clearly, the spirit within either had company or was simply talking to himself. After meeting his strange ancestor, Dastarius couldn't entirely rule out the last option. Many ghosts seemed to have caved to madness over the years. Still, he hoped the spirit he was about to meet hadn't gone so far over the brink of insanity so as to be useless. With a calculating frown, Dastarius eyed the shadowy entrance of the den for a long moment, then slowly took a step closer, trying to peer into the dark depths of the cave.

"Hello?" Narrowing his eyes to see into the darkness, he cleared his throat and raised his voice to a gruff, cautious growl. "Anyone home?"

Instantly, the muttering inside the den stopped. Two stunned amber eyes flashed in the darkness of the cave, then slowly narrowed when they caught sight of him. A low, dangerous growl rumbled from within the shadows of the den, oddly loud in the silence of the spirit realm. “What’s forest food doing in this part of the spirit world?”

Dastarius narrowed his eyes. With glinting amber irises, he slowly sat back on the gritty ground and wrapped his tail calmly around his paws, eyeing the den with a calculating frown. “I’ve simply come to ask you a few questions and perhaps form a sort of...alliance.”

The amber eyes in the den narrowed. The spirit’s dark, gruff voice growled through the thick, shadowy air. “What kind of questions?”

Dastarius hesitated for only a moment to study the eyes of the spirit inside, then merely flicked his tail and narrowed his eyes, keeping his tone even and calm. “Do you know anything about an old organization that was headed by an ancient animal named Danto and some of his...friends?”

The spirit’s amber eyes widened in shock at Dastarius’s words. He didn’t say a thing. Silence fell over them. For a long moment, the space between them was empty of any sound at all, making the shadowy air seem even thicker. After what felt like ages, the spirit inside the den slowly narrowed his eyes, a dark, guarded shadow flitting across their amber depths. “I might know...something about it. But that information can only be shared between descendants of the original members of the Organization.” A low growl rumbled in his throat. “Are you a descendant?”

Dastarius nodded without looking away. “Yes. My oldest ancestor is Danto himself. Are you a descendant?”

The spirit let out a dark, humorless chuckle. “Of course I am. Almost all rulers in my land have been descendants of one of the original members of the Organization.”

Dastarius’s tail twitched tensely across the sand in a rush of excitement and anticipation, but he kept his expression calm and empty of any emotion. “So you know a lot about this old...Organization and its members?”

“Of course.” With a soft, rumbling chuckle, the spirit slowly floated closer to the entrance of the den, his glowing amber eyes growing closer and closer. Without a sound, a dark brown, nearly black spirit stalked out through the entrance of the den and sat back in front of Dastarius, his dark

amber eyes gleaming with interest. A wide sneer curled up the corners of his mouth. “My father told me all kinds of stories about it before...” He trailed off with a dark growl, which Dastarius took to mean ‘before his father’s death.’

Narrowing his eyes, Dastarius slowly nodded his head and studied him closely. “How did your father know these stories?”

“His father told him.” The dark spirit lightly flicked his tail and shrugged. “Stories about the Organization have been passed down for centuries between the one who led the land and the one who would one day inherit that leadership. My family has almost *always* been in control. There’s only been a few rare times in history when someone from another family has managed to take over as the ruler of the land, like that blithering idiot I killed all that time ago.” With a low growl, he paused, then slowly narrowed his eyes in thought. “It’s a requirement to know about the Organization in order to lead where I lived. No one else under our control knew *anything* about it or even that we passed these stories down—which is exactly why they were so easy to control back then.” His eyes flashed and a low, furious growl rumbled in his throat. “Until that *idiot* took over!”

Dastarius’s eyes narrowed with a dark, icy sense of knowing. “I take it that idiot is the same one who caused your death.” When the spirit looked up at him in surprise, he merely flicked his tail, his voice calm but his eyes flashing in the darkness of the spirit realm. “I had the same problem. I practically had rule of the forest in my paws until that tiger *Princess* stole it from me and took my life.”

The spirit’s eyes widened and his ears pricked up in surprise. “Tiger?” All the fur along his back bristled with shock and he gritted his teeth, a low growl rumbling in his throat. “Do you mean that dumb do-gooder that hangs out with that pathetic *Dingo* all the time?”

Dastarius raised an eyebrow and calmly nodded his head. “Yes. It seems our enemies have a tendency to unite.”

“This is *sickening*.” Gritting his teeth, the dark spirit spat at the ground and curled his lip, his eyes flashing in the darkness. “I hate that stupid tiger.” A low growl rumbled in his throat, burning with hatred and rage. “And I hate *Dingo* with every last bit of my soul!”

“As do I. Which is one of the reasons why I came here.” When the dark spirit frowned and looked up at him in confusion, Dastarius calmly

flicked his tail and raised an eyebrow, his amber irises glittering with a mysterious, otherworldly light. “I only recently learned about Danto and the Organization, and now I want to learn all I can about it. If we work together, we can revive the Organization and control it ourselves. I’ve already managed to work around the rules of the spirit realm to the point where I can speak to living animals under special conditions. If we could make those conditions happen, we could enlist a whole army to serve under us and obey our every command. If you tell me more about the Organization while I manipulate Princess, her friends, and any other living animals I can pull under my control, we can exact our revenge on our enemies once and for all. And if we become powerful enough, we might even be able to finally claim our titles as the rightful rulers. Not just of our own nations,” he added, his amber eyes gleaming in the shadows, “but the world.”

The spirit’s eyes grew wide as he stared up into Dastarius’s glittering amber irises. Without realizing it, he licked his lips, his amber eyes glinting with a sudden deep thirst for blood and power. Hunger seemed to twist his shadowy features, making him look suddenly famished. With a dark, guarded expression, he narrowed his eyes and studied Dastarius for a long moment, as if deliberating whether or not to trust him. After a tense moment of silence, he slowly stepped back, his eyes flashing in the shadows. A wide, eerie sneer crept across his face.

“You make a good offer, forest food.” He paused, then narrowed his eyes, a wild fire suddenly blazing up in their burning amber depths. “If it means I’ll get a chance to take revenge on Dingo—the one I *hate* more than anything—then I’m in. And if it gives me a shot at controlling the world, that only sweetens the deal.”

“Good.” A faint grin flitted across Dastarius’s face. “In that case, I suppose we are now partners. With your information and my wit combined, we could make this world ours and rule it all on our own.” With glinting amber irises, he arched an eyebrow and slowly extended a paw, never tearing his eyes off the spirit’s. “Do we have a deal?”

The dark spirit eyed his paw cautiously, his gaze dark and narrowed. All the possibilities flitting through his mind seemed to flash across his blazing amber irises, making them glow with a thirst for blood and a deep, insatiable hunger for power. For a long moment, he studied Dastarius’s paw

in silence, then slowly curled his mouth up in a wide, cruel sneer. After a moment of hesitation, the spirit finally grabbed Dastarius's paw and shook it firmly, a dark, eerie gleam lighting up his eyes.

“We have a deal.”

Thank you for reading *Club Trouble!* If you enjoyed it, the author would greatly appreciate a review at Amazon.com or at any of your favorite online retailers. Thank you for your support!



About the Author

Sarah Renee has loved writing from an early age. At the age of 10, she came up with the idea for *The Tiger Princess*, and she wrote the novel when she was 12. She is fascinated with wild animals and the wild world outside her home and has an obvious great love of tigers. She enjoys spending time with her cats, reading, drawing and playing her violin when she is not writing. In her free time, she is constantly daydreaming about her characters, creating new ones, and coming up with wild adventure story ideas. She is 17 years old.

Visit [**www.thetigerprincess.com**](http://www.thetigerprincess.com) to learn more about Sarah Renee, her books, and more, and sign up for [**The Tiger Princess Newsletter**](#) to be notified when a new book in the Saderia Series is released!

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